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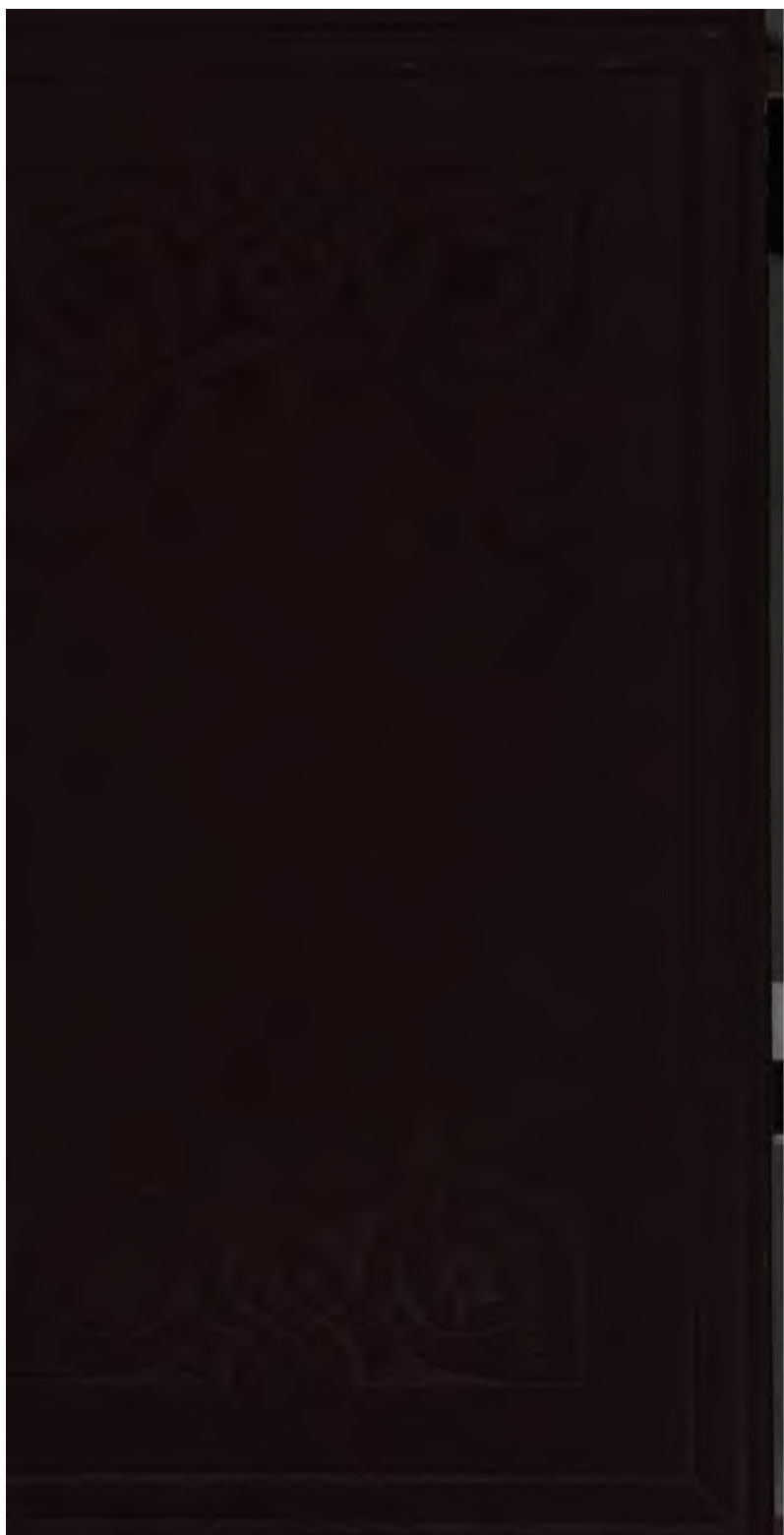
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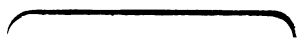
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A SCREW LOOSE.

VOL. I.

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AND CHARING CROSS

A SCREW LOOSE.

A Novel.

BY

WILLIAM P. LANCASTER, M.A.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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A SCREW LOOSE.



CHAPTER I.

A DAMP FLY.

“What is love? ’tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What’s to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty—
Then, come kiss me, sweet-and-twenty,
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.”

WITH the music of Shakespeare’s loveliest lyric yet lingering, we trust, in the memories of our audience, by way of prelude, we draw up our humble curtain of fiction, and discover a railway station, with the straggling town of Whinbury in the background. Few travellers in their senses came to

Whinbury, that sleepest of county capitals. Squires rode in, and squiresses drove in to shop; country folk trudged or jogged in to market; but for a real *bonâ fide* traveller, go and ask the host of the Three Greyhounds, and, unless he kicks you downstairs in bitterness of heart raised by your query, you will learn that Whinbury lived on its assize week, literally devoured its grand jurymen, stray witnesses, barristers, and then, like a huge boa constrictor of a city, went to sleep for another year. It opened one eye between these annual eras, at the permanent training time of its militia, but then it did not care much for the militia. The officers were but few of them county-men, and by no means flush of cash. Indeed our host would tell you that he considered many of our young townsmen, Mr. Richards, junior, for instance, fully equal to a militia officer, both in profit to

the Greyhounds and in appearance generally.

Therefore, though we revere Whinbury as our rural mother city, we admit her sleepiness. The railway had come because it could not, for shame, leave out, in these days, so central a town; but Whinbury had not invited it, and it had not freshened her up one whit. Not she; she had lived her own life long enough, and was not going to alter it now. That pert upstart cousin of hers, Addingham, some seven miles to her north, whom she could remember a coal wharf or two and a cabbage-bed, might run up a hundred or more mushroom chimneys, and hang like a black cloud for ever in her once fairest distance of vale and gentle wood. Let the creature blow her face red by night, and pollute heaven with her breath by day, Whinbury was a good drowsy tory, she thanked

God, and chimneys meant democracy, and mills all manner of evil speaking against the constitution. Was not Whinbury revenged when, in times of commercial pressure, she heard these bloated Addingham houses and Leviathan firms explode, like swollen chestnuts on a hob, at the rate of a dozen a month? Well, that might be trade, but it was not her trade. Take the Messrs. Stodge, her oldest-established wine merchants: had not Stodge, the grandfather, brewed logwood for Lord Dobbleton's grandfather; and did not the reigning Stodge of right prescriptive still supply the present peer with that same execrable vintage? Stodge thanked Providence that all this nonsense about commercial treaties had not quenched one whit the noble alcoholic fire of his sherries, or infused one drop the less into his Bordeauxs.

•

Well, as with Messrs. Stodge, so with lesser lights in Whinbury. The brass plates on the High Street doors altered seldom, and the names over the shops changed only to substitute the son's name for the father's, the widow's for her good man's. Nobody had a stiver of ready money, but then nobody ever went bankrupt. Surely, in these progress-ridden days, dear old somnolent Whinbury was a city of the blest.

So much for the town of our opening scene—now for the *dramatis personæ*. To return. The 11.20 train had just snorted up to the Whinbury station. Even the stoker looked dispirited at the deserted aspect of the platform; for stokers are at times susceptible, and really to harness to his fine snorting steam-horse for such a pitiful place as this lowered him in the eyes of ideal stokerdom. Here is a girl

of ten sucking an orange; she has come to see the train in, and is alone in that category. A huge white bundle falls from one third-class carriage, and a plethoric old woman, owner of, and much resembling in contour, the aforesaid bundle, descends after it. This is arrival number one. Then an Irish reaper gets out with his sickle neatly banded in twisted straw. This is arrival number two. Lastly, a young man of six-and-twenty, named James Butler, steps on the platform, and with him is the present narrative concerned.

The young man of six-and-twenty looks up and down the platform. He is anxious, fidgety, restless. The young man of age aforesaid tries waiting-room, refreshment-room, cloak-room; then he comes back and lounges up and down like the larger caged beasts of the Zoological Gardens, like Admiral Benbow on his quarter-deck,



like the diver at the Polytechnic, only the gyrations of this last are executed under water.

The child with an orange, having now rendered the pavement sufficiently dangerous for a dozen hospital casualties, condescends to look up from her mass of partially-denuded pulp. She advances on James Butler ; he comes to a dead halt.

"I know you're Mr. Butler now by the photograph," begins the child to him.

"Then you must be Mary's little sister," he returns, adding anxiously : "Is anything wrong?"

The girl continues, abandoning her orange now for ever :

"Mary did not dare to come up to the station this forenoon, because mother guessed that she was going to meet you, somehow, and mother is watching the road to the station, and has locked up all poor

Mary's going-out things; and please, sir, I'm Catty Weston, the youngest. But Mary has borrowed a bonnet and pelisse of Nancy Adams, and she will wait for you by the first milestone on the Addingham road, and you had better take a station fly."

"You are a good, clever little thing," replied James Butler, "and have saved your sister a disappointment." He pressed the child's hand warmly, and told her to run home as fast as she could, and hold her tongue for the rest of the day.

He chose the oldest fly-man on the rank, probably because age is supposed to bring discretion, and told him to drive along the Addingham road till further orders. The grey driver, who had seen and driven much in his time, thence inferred that he would take up fresh company before long. He was not averse to jobs of this description, as the most close-fisted man is liberal when

out with his sweetheart, and there is seldom any dispute about the fare.

Now while the broken-kneed jade of the Three Greyhounds' stables, Whinbury, is shortening with the best pace of his crazy sinews the distance between James Butler and Mary Weston, we shall devote a few lines to explaining who these two were, who meant to meet this fresh morning.

James Butler was the son of a squire the other side of the county, with a large nominal income and heavily-mortgaged estates. His father had inherited all the traditional prejudices of the squirearchy. He passed among his neighbours twenty miles round for a man of some note. Beyond that radius the British empire was unconscious of his existence. The Butlers counted for an old family in Slopeshire. That great principle, the force of *inertia*, had held each succeeding Butler down to

the spot where he was born during the six last centuries. They had just had wits enough to bully their dependents, and hand on the land to their heir-apparent. The great man of the family, during the second George's reign, had even been in Parliament for a session, and had married an earl's daughter. Sprung thus from territorial magnates, James Butler had, of course, been sent to college. He had read for honours, but had broken down therein, taking, however, his degree easily enough. He was now assisting his father in the management of his estate, and devoting himself to desultory reading. In fact, he was being as nearly idle as possible.

Mary Weston's lineage and antecedents are much more rapidly disposed of. She is a rather pretty girl of seventeen, the third daughter of a respectable draper in the High Street of Whinbury. Her parents

were dissenters, after the manner of tradesmen in county towns.

When we say "rather pretty," we confess this description is vague, but it would be difficult to get any other phrase that would be equally near the truth on all occasions. For Mary varied greatly in her looks on different days and in different dresses. In fact, she was the most difficult girl in the world to describe. Her chief charm was a gentle melancholy way of manner she had, a continual repose and settled calm approaching habitual sadness. She was a woman who could not scold—a girl who never giggled. If the reader thinks of the picture of the Cenci, he will get a faint idea of her, but still not a very exact one. In neutral tints she looked at a little distance a really lovely girl; but in the positive colours of which she was not a little fond, she seemed barely nice looking. Eng-

lish girls of the middle orders (and shall we say of the upper?) have no eye for colour, and Mary's bringing up had not been of a kind to make her any exception to the rule. So when she was happy and excited, you would hardly have known her for herself when depressed and dispirited. Now James Butler had first been attracted to Mary Weston in this manner. He had come six months before the opening of our story to serve on the grand jury at Whinbury. He had a headache one evening, and felt disinclined to face the mess of his brother jurors. The fiery port and the best things of last season's hunting had become to him a sorrow and an irksomeness. The poor-law and the inroads of radicalism he heeded them not that evening. He had ventured to contradict the deputy-chairman of quarter sessions, Tobin Muffler, Esq., the evening before on some elementary point

of English constitutional history, which James, not very long from college, had not quite managed to forget. But that great man had told James blandly and beyond appeal, that he happened to *know* he was right; and the surrounding magistrates had begun to mutter concerning young men and presumption. So James felt that Hallam and he were nowhere in that august assembly. To-night his head ached, and he would not face it again. Just about dusk is the only time when provincial towns shake off their diurnal apathy, except on market days. The High Street was buzzing with excitement as James strolled lazily down it. He passed the Mechanics' Institute, plastered over with bills announcing in large orange-coloured letters, and portrait to match, the thaumaturgic triumphs in necromancy, alchemy, and card-conjuring of Signor Udolpho Castello, wizard of the

Hebrides. That is to say, James *would* have past the Mechanics' Institute, but being in that state of vacuity which goes to see anything, from a dog fight to a lecture at the Royal Institution, he turned in for a front place and two-shilling's worth of demonology. The professor's benches were wofully empty, and the conjuring wretched enough ; so James turned, like somebody in Horace, from the play to the spectators. Not much of an audience surely. Those three girls in black, for instance, have enough to do to keep in order an equal number of younger children uproarious at the jugglery. The audience, and even the professor, are perturbed by these enthusiastic votaries of magic. Clearly one girl is about to bear out and home a sturdy urchin of tender years. In the confusion of the exit James goes out too. The thing bored him, and it was a good excuse to get away : he had hardly

noticed as yet the girl going out among the rest of her party; he half meditated a repentant return to post-prandial poor-rates and the Solons of the bench. As the girl goes out before him at the ticket-place, a young man joins her, evidently volunteers in dumb show to divide the labour of taking the refractory one home: she certainly knows him, but will have nothing to say to him: she wants, like Marguerite, no escort home. There she goes under the lamps a-head: the infant is doing his best to twist his arms out of their sockets: this girl is beginning to get interesting. Was that a rejected admirer at the door? Who knows? even Whinbury has its romances. James has taken into his idle, impulsive head that he will follow her. Done, and he gradually draws near her on the pavement, and is about to pass her, when—James has further taken into his idle, impulsive head that he

will speak to her. Done likewise; and James retires thoroughly discomfited. The over-dressed young townsman at the door has triumphed in comparison to him; for James is not good-looking, ugly, in fact, interesting-looking, as he palliates the matter to himself. After which reverse his fellow-justices again receive the repentant lamb into the judicial bosom, and Muffler's historical allusions shall to-night pass unchallenged. "How pretty she looked when she was angry," run the thoughts of James for the rest of the evening.

But be it recorded that girls who look pretty are not entirely relentless in their anger; and on James meeting one such next day in the High Street she does not look so very angry, after all, to his mind; consequently he ventures to repeat his offence, and fares infinitely better; inso-much that, though grand jury has retired

into its parks and preserves, James must needs come weekly by train into Whinbury. Surely he had an old college friend in a curacy not ten miles distant, whom he could never be away from long, but, somehow, could never get further than Whinbury in going to see him. And so Mary began to like James very much in spite of his ugly face. He treated her with a deference to which she was unused in her own class of life. James, for his part, had become thoroughly in love with a girl not eminently pretty, and with no great cleverness. He found something almost engaging in her occasional displacement of an aspirate. Her little naïve provincialisms had become absolutely attractive. It was refreshing that they had literally no subjects in common, except that one old boy-and-girl topic. James had been overflooded with classicism and purism both at

school and college, and here was a reaction with a vengeance.

But our fly-horse is nearing the first milestone on the Addingham Road, which he has sadly loitered over, and the sagacious driver sees a fluttering gown ahead, at which he thinks he may possibly have to pull up.

So it is. James springs out, and Mary kisses him quite naturally. She would have done it in a crowded railway station quite as naturally. When she saw her sweetheart after an absence, of course she kissed him. Belgravian ladies would have called it grossly indelicate, and yet she was as good a girl as any daughter of theirs.

The fly rolls on with an increased burthen towards Addingham. It is a dusty, and yet a damp, old fly, and has faded drab linings, with bulging horsehair in various

rents, and an unmistakable odour of moist hay; yet, O city Croesus, with sixty years to your back, and thousands in unimpeachable securities, with your villa that yellow Thames washes, with your "palatial" residence where the highwayman used to die game, a mansion not ungraced by strays from the Commons and an occasional Irish peer when your heavy feasts are toward, would you not even change such glory as this to be six-and-twenty, in a damp fly, not unattended of smiling Amor?

"You found my sister, of course?" said Mary; "I was so put out this morning at home. Some one told mother that we had been walking in the river quarry meadows last Tuesday week; and she spoke cruel words to me about you, and said I ought not to trust myself with you, and——"

We are at a loss how to punctuate the interruption.

“And are you afraid to trust yourself with me?” whispered James.

“That is what I cannot make out. I should be afraid of any one else, but I never was of you from the first; and yet I suppose I ought to be, as mother says so. Once, a year since, William Richards—you saw him at the Institute door that night—was for keeping company with me. I only went out once with him in the ‘eases’ towards Cumberfield Quarries, and yet I trembled the whole time I was with him, and would never go again, and yet he did not even offer to kiss me once.”

“Well, he behaved better than I am doing, dear, and, as usual, fared worse for his self-denial. One advantage we ugly fellows have is, that saucy girls are never afraid of losing their hearts to us. Besides, Mary, you know you can turn me round your little finger. A fine thing it

would be your pretending to be afraid of *me*."

"Indeed, James," interrupted Mary, with something very like a sob, "you *know* you have only to tell me to jump into yonder pit to please you, and I should be in before you counted six."

"Not if you had your best bonnet on, little one," answered he, as the April weather in Mary's face again ran out into sunshine. "But to-day only Nancy Adams—is that the name?—would suffer."

"Ah, mother found me trimming my own bonnet yesterday to meet you in. I had been singing 'to-morrow, to-morrow' all the morning as I worked. That's how she guessed it, by the new ribbons. She cries out: 'This is to meet your fine gentleman sweetheart from London in, you silly, light-headed child. No good can come of it; and if you go I won't ever forgive

you ; but best make sure.' With that she locked up all my going-out things to keep me in-doors. Indeed, I did not like vexing her by coming," resumed poor Mary, again tearfully inclined, and realizing alternate moments in her soft eyes the ambiguous predictions of weather almanacks, "fair, but showery." "Indeed, I did not like to come against her will, but I would sooner vex her than you, and you coming all this way to me."

The reader is entreated throughout this dialogue to supply the stage directions as he or she may judge them in their discretion necessary.

"And are you really a gentleman?" asked she, after a somewhat eloquent pause and silence. And she took his hand as she said it, and trifled with an old-fashioned signet ring he wore. "And these are what gentlefolks use to seal with, a bird's

head or a beast's head. Mother gets letters for orders from Major Shanter's wife at the Grange. I always get a sprig of holly or a rose ready stamped; it is much prettier. But *are* you a gentleman?"

Be it said that of James, Mary knew, beyond his name, absolutely nothing; nor, indeed, to do her justice, did she, except on rare occasions like the present, wish to know more. He was complete to her as he was without further knowledge. Indeed, she had generally a vague fear and dread of knowing more, lest the gulf between should be really wider than she suspected. She knew by instinct that James was her superior in life, but she thought he was in some large business in London. This is what she probably meant by "gentleman," and a young girl never analyzes very deeply, especially when she is happy. In a word, James was more plainly dressed

than many a spruce shopman even in Whinbury. He was studiously careful not to use fine words in speaking to her, or even to let out ~~any~~ stray allusions to his actual life. He knew such would be bad taste in the present instance, and only distress her. Besides, the name of the squire, his father, was little known to the townsfolk of Whinbury, whence he lived some thirteen miles away to the west, although Whinbury folks gossiped enough about the gentry of their own immediate neighbourhood.

There was a touch of constraint in James's voice as he replied, that he supposed he must be reckoned as a poor member of that class. But he never knew any good his gentility had brought him as yet. This, too, so despondingly said that Mary, never behindhand in comforting her lover, was fully equal to the present occasion ;

and the old fly jolted contentedly on under ambrosial bowers of hawthorn, among the rich smells of the springing grass, and the moist heat of a summer day which goes to the brain like wine. Then continued Mary :

“ I am so very, very quiet at home ; our town is so dull ; the same thing every day, except Sunday, which is worse. It is a longer day with us Methodists than for you churchfolk. Three times to chapel ; the people so hot, and the minister so hot, and then the best parlour, with our hands before us ; and then I keep counting the time till you are to come to me again, and, whether I seemed pleased, or what, mother looks up at me suddenly, and I go red all over, and she tells me to put away this levity on the Lord’s Day, and to think about Gideon or Barak hewing their foes asunder before the Lord, or some other

Christian subject. And then the room is so close, and the flies buzz so, that I begin to doze, and see her sitting upright at her bible twice as large as life; and the bells deafen one outside, and I put sleepy words to them—maybe, some sentence of yours which I have kept in mind from our last walk,—until I wake up with my mother scolding me again for smiling at nothing at all.”

So she would prattle on to James of her simple life and ways. She talked to him as she thought aloud to herself. As unconsciously as the thrush in yonder hedge is hurrying out its thoughts. James counted almost as herself; telling James was telling no one. Why, of course, she told James as she kissed James, but kissing or telling any one else was quite another business.

And where did the fly and benevolent driver land them at last? At a tea-garden

in the suburbs of the great city of Addingham, with a pleasant wood contiguous, albeit somewhat smoky; the country asserting itself for the last time in this foliage, and afterwards quietly subsiding into the leagues of brick and mortar that skirt Addingham the great.

They sat at one of the garden tables, and listened to a wretched band which was throbbing away in the distance. Cupid spoils the appetite, and the waiter had instinctively taken them under his especial patronage as remunerative customers. He saw they were helpless in a worldly point of view, and he cheated them accordingly. Mary was rather embarrassed over the tea-making; perhaps this social office implied household command and a thousand little associations in a girl's mind. But James was restless enough over the meal, and whispered that she might as well be fifty

miles away from him as sitting there among the eyes and tea-tables of all these staring holiday folk. So a stroll to the wood is proposed and carried, the waiter preserving a dignified neutrality. Here they found tall feathery bracken neck-high, and a perfect sea of it, and intersecting glades and a blue-black roofing of Scotch fir.

"There, you have had a many," said Mary, resuming the conversation.

Very monotonous this, O middle-aged reader, to whom the share list is an oracle, and Mincing Lane the seat of the just man made perfect in solvency! Very frivolous this, O seniorest wrangler bent double over asteroid and epicycle in your heaven-gazing tower aloft! Very stuff and nonsense this, O statesman jostling down to Westminster with your fire-new scheme for the transference of dead paupers and live idiots in your pocket! Very monotonous indeed,



but so is yonder wood-pigeon who has only her six notes, which having enunciated once and clearly to the world she has surely no further message, and ought to be stopped by act of parliament. Whereas now she has sung them over and over again to the great hindrance of various earnest subjects of her Majesty who are doing a little mental arithmetic on their way to office. By the way too, this recurrence of hot and cold weather, named of the romantic summer and winter, is very monotonous too. An equable temperature all the year round would suit business men vastly better. And as for the leaves and such minor details we can arrange them by a schedule hereafter. There is a thing called birth and another named death which are singularly monotonous too.

But our lovers in the fern and pine-shadows did not care to analyze these



things. The sun drew lower and lower, and yet they had plenty to say. The old fly-horse stood at bait, save for importunate flies and a thorough draught, contentedly, and the driver was at ease in his mind. Was he not doing a good day's business in a very leisurely and comfortable way?

What is the point of sitting hand in hand in damp fern at sunset? We may leave this question unresolved, for Mary draws on her shawl, and shivering just a little, finds it is full time to return.

"Now, James, come you lazy thing. You know what a scolding you are to cost me when I get back; and if it's long after the edge of dark it will be worse and worse. What! not unless I give you one,—all by myself? Well then there, will that content you. Not a fair one? Silly, what do you call a fair one? I've lost my brooch

now somewhere, you must help me to find it. This tiresome moss and grass, it's as difficult to part as my back hair. Oh, there you are, and a great yellow-striped caterpillar on you. No, I can put it in better than you can. You will never get the collar to lie smoothly : here, let me, clumsy fingers. Now we are ready at last, one, two, three, and away back to a scolding and Whinbury."

The tea-garden is emptying fast as they go down ; the waiter is mollified the driver fortifies himself yet once before he is homeward bound. The apology for an animal of draught is introduced between the shafts. Critics might complain that his knee joints had a tendency to bend the wrong way. But if he contents the Three Greyhounds of Whinbury, we do not intend to cavil.

The road back needs little commemora-

tion, as being not unlike the road there. Except that the nearer she got to home the more formidable the imminent family explanation seemed to poor Mary. She had laughed it away among the fern; but now with the approaching gas-lights of Whinbury ahead, the matter grew terribly serious. James left the child half crying about a dozen yards from her own door. She called him back once, having nothing whatever to say, but simply she did not like him to go. He applied the old panacea, and laughingly told her he would ring the bell for her at home, and then she could not help going in. She entreats him to do so very gently; she watches him getting mistier and mistier under the third lamp-post. She is back again into the prose of life for a week, and that extremely stern—shall we say Miltonic—prose of English middle-class Dissent.

.

Her sister Catty opens the door very noiselessly.

“Is that you, Mary? Mother is waiting for you, of course; and I would not face her now for Queen Anne’s necklace; she has taken her Bible down to read out of prayer hours, and you know she always treats us worst after she does that.”

CHAPTER II.

MR. PERCEVAL OF DAVENTRY.

"I ride and I drive, and I care not a d——n,
The people look up and they ask who I am;
And if I should chance to run over a cad,
I pay for the damage, if ever so bad
So useful it is to have money, heigho !
So useful it is to have money."

Parvenant. Clough.

ONE of the most rising men in Slopeshire was Mr. Lionel Perceval of Daventry Manor. Mr. Perceval was a rich man, Mr. Perceval was a good-looking man, Mr. Perceval was an accurate man. He was above all a neat man : all his clothes seemed to fit him to a nicety. His boots were better polished than his neighbour's,

and his hair was better brushed. He had a knack, however busy he was, of always keeping his gloves clean, and he affected gloves of light colours, as a man who defied the dust of the world to stick to him. His whiskers were extremely glossy, and were cut upon his cheek with a geometrical accuracy that was positively annoying. He was civil to every one, and never lost his temper. His features were extremely regular, and reminded his special admirers of the head of St. John in pictures of the old masters. Mr. Perceval was thirty-two years of age when we make his acquaintance, and owned one of the most compact and improving estates in Slopeshire. He needed no boundary-stones to mark the place where his fields began, for the straggling fences of his neighbours gave place to quicks as bushy and neatly trimmed as their landlord's whiskers, while his gate-



posts shone like mahogany. As for his drainings and top-dressings, are they not written in the chronicles of the Slopeshire Agricultural Society?

And yet Mr. Perceval had not been born in the purple of Slopeshire squiredom, as his abundance of ready money only too surely indicated. In Slopeshire a mortgage was held a sign of respectability, inconvenient, it is true, like the gout, but showing likewise a too generous living during several generations at least. Only plebeian acres could be in that vulgar state of *parvenu* health which had never felt incumbrance.

At the beginning of the present century few of the lords, and possibly some of the commons, under whose paternal rule we repose, had ever heard of the town of Addingham. Since then, this Aphrodite of the North has risen from her coal-

measures in such imperious beauty of strength, with her coronal of a thousand chimneys, that now the least whim or whisper of the proud democratic beauty brings ministers and parliament at her smoky feet. Well, in the rising town of Addingham, doing his business inconspicuously among the rest, was a little bright-eyed Jew, of the name of Michael Cohen. What he actually started as is enveloped in mystery; however he became, while still a young man, clerk in a third-rate Addingham warehouse. After continuing in this position for about three years, when he had nearly made himself indispensable to the partners of the house, he one day, without rhyme or reason, threw up his situation quite suddenly. He disappeared thenceforward from Addingham for a short time, but on his return he set up for himself, in a very small way, as commission

agent ; hence it was concluded that he had come into some little money during his absence. He managed, however, to set things right with his former house, but he always turned the conversation when questioned about the motives of his previous retirement. He next got a small share in a joint-stock mill, and managed to do so well, by this and in other ways, that he developed ultimately into mill-owner on his own account. We might go on to tell how he reckoned his income by thousands now, and growing somewhat grey and business-beaten, determined to end up as a gentleman. How young Daventry of Daventry had been sold up about this time, whose father had deeply involved his estate in return for the ineffable honour of some transient notice from our great and good Prince Regent. And how Daventry retired to mediate on past beatitudes at

Boulogne, under the shadow and countenance of a name too great in quintessential gentility for the present humble chronicler to presume even to write it. Here the elder Daventry died, leaving little to his son save the credit of selling a large property. How old Cohen bought Daventry Manor, and was "drawn in" to his territories by an enthusiastic tenantry at five shillings a head and admittance free for the evening to the Green Bear. All these things are now somewhat faded from the memories of the Slopeshire gossips. The first thing old Cohen did was to write up to a society of antiquaries near St. Peter's, London, hinting a partiality for the name of Perceval; and it is to be recorded as one of the greatest triumphs in the research of these learned men, that, by exceeding erudition, they were enabled to discover by the third post—and posts were slower then



—that Mr. Cohen *was* collaterally descended from the Percevals of Falaise in Normandy, and Battle Abbey in this kingdom. They were even kind enough to add full particulars, and to transmit the correct blazonry to an enterprising coachmaker in Short-rood Street. The second thing Mr. Cohen-Perceval, as he now signed himself, did, was to disappoint certain neighbouring matrons, who looked kindly on his pepper-grey locks, by summoning, apparently out of the earth, his wife and youthful son. She was a quiet, weak, flabby woman, rather his junior, who seemed uncomfortable at her sudden grandeur, and who died before her husband, leaving no mark upon Slope-shire society, into which she neither sought nor received admission. Old Cohen, too, in due time, slept, not with his own, but with Daventry's fathers, after a reign of some years as squire-merchant. He kept on his

warehouse at Addingham to the last : with the squires he had amalgamated little. He had sent his son to college to finish him, and to a German university as a preparative thereto. He was not quite satisfied with Lionel's progress at Bonn, and, in fact, removed him rather abruptly from this Teutonic seat of learning ; but at every other period of his life, as at Oxford afterwards, Lionel was a model son, taking his examinations creditably, and never exceeding his allowance. At the last, old Cohen had dropped off rather suddenly ; but Lionel bore his loss with equanimity, and on the second day after his father's funeral he fully convinced his land-agent that he had as good a man of business as the late lamented capitalist to deal with.

Lionel Perceval saw at once that at eight-and-twenty, and being in the second generation at Daventry, he had a much

more brilliant hand to play than his father ever held. He knew, moreover, that his father had harmed and weighted himself both with squires and mill-owners by halting between each character. Lionel's first act was to clear himself at once and decisively from all business connection with Addingham. He sold out of the mill at a remunerative rate, and made a point of buying up every acre that fell into the market round Daventry Manor. He had cast his lot then with the squires, and yet they knew not him nor his fathers. It was uphill work enough at first. Be it known that Slopeshire is distrustful of strangers and proud of its pedigrees. Slopeshire was the peculiar and accredited parish, let us say, of some twenty families, bound together by infinitesimal degrees of cousinhood. Every one else, Slopeshire argued, must belong by a law of settlement, as old

as the time when the angel delivered her constitution to Britannia, to some other parish. Consequently, he who intruded on another man's parish was clearly a thief and a robber. Perceval was such an intruder, and this impoverished oligarchy hated him more from the contrast of his riches to their chronic "scraping along." In the hunting-field it was all very well. For he had the best cigars and sherry always at the disposal of any one in the best Slopeshire set, and he would aid any one of the same set in discomfiture ; but at the county-assembly, for instance, he found he was nobody. Why should Miss Agnes Aston refuse to be introduced to him at the intercession of young Blinders of the Greens, then stationed at Addingham, whose father was actually in the leather-trade ? And yet that youth had even waltzed with Miss Agnes. Why did Miss Teabury,



daughter to Sir Wafers Teabury, county member, on finding her cavalier was Perceval's *vis-à-vis*, feign indisposition, and retire to bitter tea and damp bread and butter? Perceval soon perceived that Slopeshire pride would never receive him by fair means, so he deliberately purposed with himself that they should receive him by stratagem. He opened his first parallel by confiding under seal of the strictest secrecy to Mrs. Major Shanter, a kind of *vivandière* on the outposts of Slopeshire society, his fixed determination to marry into one of the old families of the county. This having been duly retailed by Shanter on her daily cantine rounds, various heavy fathers damned Perceval heavily for his presumption; and various beery brothers, with most uncertain allowances, said there was no good in having blood now-a-days; but more than one matron, in spite of her

squire's denunciation, had begun to think that for Mary Jane, now past thirty, with a very damaging "disappointment," Perceval and plenty (which had the ring of an agricultural meeting toast about it) might be preferable to spinsterhood and genteel destitution. Anyhow, Slopeshire began to ask him to dinner soon after this in a distant off-hand way, which was rather more offensive than leaving him uninvited. But then Slopeshire had received direct from Heaven or Runnymede a special charter for making interlopers feel their position, which, in these levelling days, was surely a precious and blessed gift, abiding only with the chosen of the earth.

But the invitations came; that was the great point; for Perceval could easily enough hold his own against the heavy insolence of these magnates, while his good looks and admirable self-possession gener-

ally enlisted the young ladies of the house on his side ; therefore there was sword and contention on his account in many a Slope-shire household. The next point was how to get his name on the commission of the peace. Lord Dobbleton, we all know, kept the rolls of Slopeshire, and somewhat slumbered in his keeping. To his august ear, in one of his Lordship's most wakeful, or rather somnambulistic moments, the claims of Perceval to this honour as a landed proprietor, had been but too abruptly breathed. But Lord Dobbleton had turned uneasily, and muttering "trade," "inroads," "democracy," had sunk back into that dreamy state of self-contemplation which Aristotle tells us is the highest kind of thought, and that in which alone the gods can possibly indulge.

The fact was, that the real power of nomination rested with the chairman and

deputy chairman of Sessions. The last was Tobin Muffler, Esq., of Sheepshanks Hall. The projection of a railway through the very heart of the Slopeshire pastures had roused the squires to a man. Muffler alone was not inexorable to the scheme, was even heard to talk of yielding to progress and the spirit of the day. Now, such language was rank atheism in Slopeshire. Perceval had been an original promoter of the line, and became ultimately one of the chief directors. He had his own suspicions of Muffler's policy, and by bullying and cross-questioning the solicitor of the railway, he elicited one by one the particulars of a very pretty little bargain between Muffler and the company. Him meeting at a squire feast soon after he took aside, and said he found it very inconvenient as a landed proprietor not being on the commission.



“My dear fellow,” rejoined Muffler, “to be frank with you, it *is* inconvenient : and the owner of Daventry has claim enough. But, between ourselves, Dobbleton—you understand—there’s the hitch—will have men of family. Excuse me not blinking the truth : have asked him a dozen times myself.”

“In that case, Mr. Muffler, we will change the subject, with many thanks for your courteous explanation. By the way, I know you are more friendly to us poor directors of the Addingham South Loop Line than our other friends here ; you may, perhaps, care to know that we have had some deuced unpleasant explanations with our solicitor lately : find he has been pledging us right and left : taking too much on himself, and so forth. Your name was mentioned too as having been a *little hard* upon us.”

Poor Muffler's florid countenance had, during the latter part of this dialogue, assumed a mottled lead colour. He gasped out faintly at its conclusion, "That he had long considered Perceval in the light of a son, and that Dobbleton might possibly be persuaded after all. And," he added with much hesitation, "you see, Perceval, it's no use bothering those there," with a wave towards the rest of the company, "Dunstew, and Chip, and the rest, about these railway affairs, for they don't understand them, and are pig-headed enough to put wrong constructions upon people's motives, and so forth, you know."

Ending very lamely, O fluttered Muffler ! How changed from that Muffler sentencing, in the grandeur of a judicial eloquence, a girl who has stolen twopenny worth of worsted.

"I never talk business out of business

hours," replied Perceval, drily, "unless I have a special reason for doing so."

It is curious to add that a month after this Perceval duly qualified as one of her Majesty's justices of the peace in the hundred of Grayfen, in the county of Slopeshire.

So another step in the ladder was mounted. And Slopeshire now perceived that she must receive Perceval on fair terms of capitulation, and under tacit protest that this was a concession to these evil and latter days; surely the Arcadian times of squire-dom had gone out with cock-fighting and stage-coaches.

Perceval had been called to the bench three years when our story finds him at breakfast at Daventry the day after James Butler had paid his visit to Whinbury. He was leisurely perusing the *County Herald*, wherein her two members had been flooding

Slopeshire with eloquence at a pig and cow show. Sir Wafers Teabury, M.P., thought the constitution was going to the dogs, and alluded, in a masterly way, to all the ramifications of a dispute concerning the appointment of a local postman. He was convinced that no Slopeshire man, he might say no Slopeshire child (loud cheers) would fail their king and their country; and he expressed a hope that their king and country would not (after such handsome behaviour on the part of Slopeshire adult and adolescent) offer to fail them. (Hear.) He had alluded to the Slopeshire child, because an eminent writer, probably Shakespeare, had said the child was father to the man (enthusiasm): and he would tell that Slopeshire child that the constitutional—he might say conservative (cheers)—traditions would be some day in his keeping, he might say sacred keeping (dead silence, and one old

gentleman visibly affected), and shame befall that child if he was unable to maintain the watchwords and bulwarks which the lifeblood of their forefathers had nourished and defended. Sir Wafers was reported to have resumed his seat amid great confusion of cheering, and, we may add, of metaphor.

The *Herald* went on to dilate how their excellent junior representative, Scarsley Plumpton, Esq., had, on rising, regretted the anarchical aspect of public affairs. He felt convinced that a commission, with an efficient secretary, on the present unsettled state of political opinion in these islands was imperatively called for. From carefully ascertained statistical tables the following important fact had been arrived at; that the great proportion of weekly drunkenness among the lower orders took place between Saturday afternoon and Monday morning. (Cheers.) The working man had only

lately begun to be studied as he deserved, and statistical science had made rapid strides towards the solution of the difficulty of dealing with the masses. The first point towards keeping the working man from drink was to ascertain *when* he got drunk : this science had effected. (Hear, hear.) He also hoped they were in a fair way of knowing by the conclusion of next session *where* the working man got drunk. It would be premature to hint at present at the details. If they could discover and combine the *when* with the *where*, drunkenness might be considered as virtually annihilated through these dominions. He begged, in conclusion, to propose the health of the judges of fat stock.

Perceval never laughed heartily : he had an idea it was vulgar to do so, and he was a most gentleman-like man ; perhaps a little too consciously so. He laughed in the present instance, but moderately. After a time

he became thoughtful, and pushed away the toast-rack and the *County Herald*.

“Why should not I,” said he, “in a year or two take the place of one of these pompous fools? Because, as my Lord Dobbleton would tell me, I have neither family nor position. Well, but why should not I marry for connection and so get family at second-hand. Why not even Dobbleton’s daughter? She is sure not to have more than her two or three thousand pounds. Dobbleton is too great a man on a small income to give her more. The bargain would be fair, I money, she rank, and then, on the Dobbleton prestige I might contest the county to-morrow. And yet it’s hazardous work speculating on an empty-headed girl who may change her mind every hour. Suppose this only a second string to my bow. Would Slopeshire return me on my own merits. Certainly not. Unless I got, may

be, Plumpton, or Teabury to vacate specially in my favour. A likely thing for either to do. But could I not frighten or force one of them into resignation, with a graceful compliment or two towards his possible successor. Ah, there we come again to my favourite rule of action. 'Every man has a screw loose somewhere : ' find the screw, and the man is a puppet in your hands. I fathomed the weakness of the solemn Muffler, and the bench was the fruits of the venture. Next, granted these men are assailable, which is *primâ facie* likely to prove the easier game ? Plumpton is a doctrinaire, Teabury is an arrogant idiot. The doctrinaire by all means. Teabury is purely obstructive, Plumpton foolishly constructive. The last is sure to be most vulnerable. The fool at ward is stronger than the fool at thrust. So Plumpton be it, with all my heart. But here I break down. I want a

tool—an accomplice. I cannot condescend to lurking behind corners and patching together old letters. The most chivalrous king must have his diplomatic spies, why should I not have mine? But I will have no infractions of the law : I am no such bungler. It's like bursting a safe with a great noisy crow-bar, when you can pick the lock quietly. The man is a fool, and an unworkmanlike fool, who among the enlightenments of this nineteenth century can't gain any object he pleases without breaking his shins over the letter of the decalogue. The penal code puts up great coarse black and white scarecrows here and there ; but there is plenty of room to pick up the seeds and worms between them, and no need to run foul of the flimsiest. Besides, I am a man who likes system and neatness. All rough crime is so anarchical, has such agged ends and inconsistencies. Besides,



I had much rather do right when it is not glaringly against my self-interest. I am a liberal landlord, and so I get substantial and improving tenants. Old King Butler screws his, and gets only men without capital, who smash every other year, and cost him more in his wrangles with their assignees than I have lost in moderating my rents. Then, besides, I get credit and he abuse. And credit is marketable enough as the wise man knows. But, where was I? This tool to make inquiries; suppose him found. Let us calculate the risks of employing him. Plainly I must have some strong hold on him to begin with, to stop his mouth and make him work. But let us face the worst: suppose we disagree and he proclaims abroad the errand I have set him on. If he turns king's evidence *after* he has found out anything, I can snap my fingers at him; for then I shall say I have

acted on grounds of public morality suspecting all along the unknown quantity. But let him turn upon me *before* he has found out anything, and there is still my word against his; and I shall take care to select some one whose previous antecedents have already damaged that volatile and impalpable essence, his credibility. Well, I will think this over leisurely."

And Perceval again began to peruse the *County Herald*. He had read a column or two with very flagging attention, when, at the conclusion of the report of a trial at the Addingham Police Court, his face assumed an expression of the deepest interest. It told of how in one of the silk mills the proprietors suspected they were being very largely robbed by the petty pilferings of silk which the factory girls managed every day to secrete in their stays on leaving work. The mill-owners were most anxious

to detect the receivers, knowing the thefts would cease without a receiver. Considerable ingenuity had been necessary both to detect and bring the crime home to the principal culprit. The paragraph concluded thus:

“The greatest credit is due to Mr. Luke Webb, a rising young solicitor of Whinbury, for his indefatigable exertions in tracing out the ramifications of this wholesale system of fraud.”

“And I suspect,” concluded Perceval, “Mr. Luke Webb’s turning up just now to be the greatest piece of luck I have had since I came into Slopeshire. Yet why hasn’t he changed his name? Thinks, I suppose, his little affair had died out of knowledge with my father. ‘Rising young solicitor!’—the old story. No man without his weak point. I see the rest of my morning must be spent over Box No. 3, Estate of the late Michael Cohen-Perceval.”

CHAPTER III.

THE BRASS DOOR-PLATE IN WHINBURY WITH THE NAME OF WEBB.

“How many a father have I seen,
A sober man, among his boys,
Whose youth was full of foolish noise,
Who wears his manhood hale and green ;”
In Memoriam.

MR. LUKE WEBB, the rising young solicitor, occupied in Whinbury the typical lawyer's house which every country town possesses—a house with a half-baked stucco look, very square, very bald, with a prominent green door and brass plate, and a painful sense of crowded muslin-blinds in all the four windows to the front.

Mr. Luke Webb sat in his front parlour, for the day was wet and business slack. It was an hour of domesticity, and, save for a faint whistle from the boy who was minding the office, Mr. Luke Webb might almost have forgotten that he was a "rising solicitor."

He was a little bright-eyed man of twenty-nine, plump, and good-natured looking : the sort of man you would ask the way in the street with the certainty of a civil and clear answer—a quiet, comfortable personage, eupeptic, whose work agreed with him, and whose leisure was positively luxurious. The man had a hearty way, too, especially with children. His hair was cropt very short, but lay quite smoothly in spite of its shortness. The whole man seemed a very ordinary, genial personage, who would go through life with hardly a rub, and end with an irreproachable epitaph—mourned by the possible presentation of a fish-knife



to attest public sympathy with his widow ; and yet, if you watched him narrowly for any length of time, you would have possibly mistrusted your first-sight judgment of this man. His eyes were so restless, while his face was so placid ; and his fingers were subject to occasional twitchings, however easy the rest of his attitude might be.

His wife sat working by him, and two quite young children were playing about. Mrs. Webb had still some traces of goodlooks, but, though not much over five-and-twenty, had lost all the freshness of youth. The children were rehearsing in their game the examination and subsequent committal to gaol of a poacher, of which they had glimpses through the office-door the day before. The elder boy, Luke, was taking the double part of magistrate and constable —“quite natural,” as his mother remarked —while to his brother Tommy, as junior,

fell the less responsible representation of the culprit.

“What has Mary Weston been here about, Sarah?” inquired Webb; “you had a precious long talk together.”

“I expect poor Mary’s troubles are just beginning,” returned Mrs. Webb, quietly. “The poor child’s head is full of nonsense from them tales at ‘the Circulating;’ and now, it seems, she has got a sweetheart in earnest—a gentleman from London; but she seems to know very little about him, which don’t look well.”

“And yet you knew nothing about me when you married me, Sarah; so why shouldn’t your sister take her young man on trust?”

“Oh, you were quite different, Luke!” replied Mrs. Webb, with much pride and affection in her manner. “Besides, you had the business here in Whinbury, and



were a householder and an Odd Fellow, and even mother was glad enough to get you ; but she goes on with Molly terribly about this other."

"I wish aunt Mary would take us to another conjuring!" clamoured Tommy Webb, from the floor.

"You ain't old enough to go," taunted Luke, junior. "You only have to be carried out."

"And yet the old lady," resumed Webb, "who, in spite of her psalms, knows the difference between a crown and an oyster-shell, might have found out that when I bought the good-will of this business from Dovedew's widow a few years gone, there was not and isn't a soul in Whinbury to tell whether I came north, south, east, or west, to take the concern." Thus Mr. Webb, somewhat warmly through his placidity. But Mrs. Webb only replied by a

conjugal embrace, for her husband would talk strangely like this at times, and her feminine tact taught her that no answer was in such cases best answer.

“Oh, papa! do come and be prisoner, and get locked up, for naughty Luke says he won’t do both ‘pleaceman’ and Mr. Muffler any more.”

Papa did not receive the proposal quite as well as the child had expected, but at the moment the household had enough to do with thinking about a fly which drove up through the pouring rain to Mr. Webb’s green door.

Luke retired to his office to receive this new and unexpected client. Bob, the office boy, opened the door with much pomp and much creaking of boots. Mrs. Webb laid an ambuscade to view the visitor as he passed, under the common and somewhat ostrich-like delusion that no one can be

seen in the clink of a door an inch ajar.

"Who on earth is it?" mused Webb to the approaching boots.

"Mr. Perceval," said Bob, instantly disappearing after his admission of the visitor.

"God bless me, Master Lionel!" exclaimed Webb, for once in his life taken quite aback. "Won't you send your flyman away, or let him come under shelter in the yard? It would rain the feathers off a duck's back just now."

"In the first place, Webb," began Perceval, sententiously, "I am glad to see you again, which you are not to see me. In the next place, it is mere affectation you're calling me Master Lionel now. And, in the last place, I made my bargain in fair weather with the driver, that he should bring me here, wait an hour or under, and

drive me back for six shillings. The rain was his risk, so let him soak."

"God bless me, how like your late respected father you speak, Mr. Lionel," was all Webb could answer at the moment. "He was a humorous old gentleman," he continued with an effort. "I remember him starving them two pointer dogs as the owner had left with him and gone bankrupt. And how savage he was with an office lad as gave them half an orange. O, what a humorous old gentleman he was!"

"I shall have to allude to another reminiscence of your service with my father presently. So I am glad you have introduced the subject yourself," said Perceval very quietly.

Webb was not a demonstrative man, but his eyes were sparkling now like a cat's at bay with a street dog. He looked at the

poker ; he looked at the window ; he found no suggestion in either ; he sank from mere force of habit into a comfortable attitude in an arm-chair ; and listened with a miserable attempt to seem pleased.

“ Ah, my friend Webb, you have a snug berth here, I fancy. Marigolds to the front, gooseberry-bushes in the distance. Domestic life, wife and family—Mrs. Webb did me the honour to watch me as I came in—an increasing business as the *Herald* tells me. All very good things in their way. Last, a noble public career in repressing crime in our native town, silk-stealing, vagrancy, poaching, or, let us say, forgery.”

“ Mr. Perceval,” said Webb, now much more himself when the worse was out, and desperation had given him courage : “ Your father was a hard gentleman, but you were harder as a boy than he with the excuse of age, which hardens all men. He wished to

forgive me that doctored account-book and the forged vouchers, because he knew exactly how hard I had been put to it to do that, and because I was the handiest boy in his office. 'You're a clever boy,' he said, 'and I wish I could keep you spite of this; but it would never do; be off with you, and if I hear nothing against you for the next two years I'll tear up these documents. Anyhow, not to ruin a boy's chance in life no one shall know this but myself, unless I hear of you breaking out in the same line again.' But he didn't destroy them; he died too sudden as I've heard for that, and now, I suppose, you've got them. What do you want of me? You can't need my business. What good will it do you telling Whinbury people all this?"

"It may do me no good, but it will do you a good deal of harm. I want you merely to work for me as you used to work



for my father, only I shall want better work now, as the law and mature age must have improved the powers of a young clerk. I want you to make certain inquiries for me ; and never to bother me with any fine morality about the nature of your employment. I want you to be secret, and, as far as I am concerned, honest. If you do all this there is no reason we should not get on as comfortably as in old times."

"But," said the wretched Webb, "it was much easier for me to be a rascal in those days. I've a wife now, and children ; and though you sneer, sir, I'm fond enough of them."

"You must excuse me, Webb," continued Perceval, "if I cannot enter into your domestic feelings (which, of course, do you great credit, and so forth) in the bargain we are about to make. I want a simple answer, Yes or No, to my terms."

“You know well enough what my answer must be,” answered Webb; “yet I hate and detest this business: here was I reformed, and you drag me back against my will. You are a rich gentleman without a stain on your coat. I am a low forger. I wonder which is the guiltiest of us two after all?”

“You are out of sorts now, Webb,” said Perceval; “so I shall pardon the obvious bad taste and personality of this appeal of yours to first principles. You are irritated with me, and human nature is weak. I find you leading a delightfully pastoral life, sitting under your own fig-tree, and skinning, possibly, your own calves for parchment. I break in rudely on this dream, reminding you that you are clay like your neighbours, and you make me a rude speech, which I overlook, and so we get comfortably to business.”



Perceval then took a seat at the table, and the two conversed in low tones for half an hour longer, when the dripping fly-man again conducted Perceval to Whinbury station. As for poor Webb, the blandishments of family life had become to him a bitterness and a desolation. Mrs. Webb has "never seen Luke so put out." Tommy Webb "had never seen papa so cross; he boxed my ears when I ast him to come and play at going to gaol." The boy in the office "wondered what the blazes wos up with the guv'ner."

Altogether the visit of Lionel Perceval had not shed a soothing influence over the hearth and home of the rising Whinbury attorney.

CHAPTER IV.

KEEPING UP A POSITION AND WHAT IT
COMES TO.

“ This is the little god of some lean acres,
 The petty tyrant of a dozen farms,
 The Solon of the bench, who never pays,
 And always damns his tradesmen—‘ Why, Lord bless you,
 This is the squire, our squire ; hats off, you lads there.’ ”

The Customs of the Country.

LEECE COURT was a straggling old manor-house of the Inigo Jones period. The park lay badly about the house, looping away for some distance in a direction which could not be seen from the hall windows ; while the high road ran within two hundred yards of the back premises. The timber was not good,



for all the old trees were dead or dying, while the young ones were not yet grown up. The lodge of the main approach was in a ruinous state, and the rabbits had provided against the flowering of any vegetation in the garden. A lean old pauper had just crept out to re-admit the Squire, who had been taking a mile walk on the turnpike road before breakfast. King Butler, Esq., the owner of Leece Court, could not be far short of seventy. He was a thin, wiry, old man, rather under the middle height. A fresh-coloured old man withal, with little crowded red veins all over his cheeks, which gave him a sham youthful look. His face went off to a point like a fox's, and his stiff, thick eyebrows and hair were like a wiry terrier's. He had a crafty look, and a high top to his head. He was very sanguine and self confident. He could still walk down many a young man



on a hard day after the "birds" late in the season. He was very restless and very tough. He was in a few matters profuse, but in most things extremely stingy. He had a wretched head for business and accounts, and yet he flattered himself he had a peculiar turn for both. Consequently, he trusted no one but himself in these matters. He worked laboriously enough, but to little purpose, making elaborate calculations which were nearly always wrong, on the strength of which he often dribbled away in a month all that he had saved by the parsimony of a year.

On the morning in question King Butler has risen early, as is his wont, a virtue which generally spoils the temper of those who practise it. The chief and exceeding reward of early rising is to make it an instrument of social oppression towards the average-time risers. Moreover, it puts a

fine edge on the temper, which may be turned to account in a variety of ways. The Squire delayed a few moments to teach an old labourer how to weed one of his walks, showing the veteran that his preconceived notions on this point were to be henceforth dismissed. And another stoppage occurred in the stable-yard, where a groom-boy was singeing a carriage-horse on what the Squire conceived grossly unorthodox principles. Thus King Butler reached his breakfast room invigorated and refreshed by the agreeable morning tonic of rowing a dependant.

The family party comprises James Butler, whom we know, his two sisters, Caroline and Mabel, and his mother, who is styled at full the Honourable Mrs. Butler, and is a sister of Richard, present and third Baron Dobbleton, who is great in the land.

Carry Butler has barely saved her dis-

tance to the breakfast-room before the Squire's return. King Butler was late too, but his lateness was meritorious, being the lateness of extreme occupation and estate business. Though what business he had done this morning it would be difficult to say, beyond threatening to report to the turnpike trust a stone-breaker at the half-way mile-stone between Leece and Ember (the shopping town of the Butlers), for not mashing his boulders sufficiently small.

Now Carry had just come down to breakfast, and by a too conscious effort of looking as if she had been there for hours, accompanied by a suppressed rapidity of breathing, the Squire was down on her at once.

“ Ah, you've been up a long time, Miss, this fine spring morning ; feeding the ducks, I be bound. Well, you needn't shake your gown out. I heard you scuttle in just

before me. If you hadn't a poor, old father to get up early and keep things together, you'd have none of your fine silks and satins to plume down, I can tell you. I'm nigh seventy, and have to be up towards Ember when your fine foreigneering maid is going up with your warm water."

Carry only replied by contemptuously raising her eye-brows. Now, Carry was the beauty of the family, for every family must have a beauty, as it must have a cook or a skeleton. Given three plain sisters, the least plain occupies this necessary post; given three pretty ones, the prettiest gets it, if the family verdict is right—which it very often isn't. Carry Butler was a showy-looking girl, somewhat languid, not very high-bred in appearance, but pretty enough when she wasn't speaking. What she wanted was an indescribable something of neatness and fitness. Her curls

seemed coming off, and her complexion was too abruptly good. Her dresses never seemed to sit her comfortably; she had an appearance of being dressed smart for an occasion always: she gave one the idea of having just taken her ringlets from curl-papers, and that she was perpetually uneasy as to how long they would remain fresh and crisp.

The Squire finding Carry was too languid this morning for that family skirmishing which gave a kind of anchovy-paste relish to his morning toast, next directed his attention to his wife.

“Good God, Flavia! What do you sit staring at me for from behind the urn in that way? Ain’t my corduroys good enough for ladies’ parlours, or what? Why, servants will always leave the muffin-divisions hanging together by a thread, like seamen’s limbs after action, passes my com-

prehension. There it comes, dragging the other on to the table-cloth, grease and all. Why can't they cut them right through? I know it's all part of a system to irritate me. Am I to keep a pack of lazy idle Jacks and Jills, and have after all to spend my valuable time dividing muffins? Ain't I a county magistrate and a landlord, and worked off my legs for time as it is. I tell you what it is, Flavia, if you will mind your novels and Berlin-worsted cats and flowers least, and your household a little more, I shouldn't be fretted to shreds every morning of my life by the neglect of my servants."

Mrs. Butler supposed meekly that the muffins were in "the boy's" department; now this boy was a mythical and mysterious character in the Butler household, as seldom seen in the upper regions as the banshee; and only then on the occasion of great public disasters, such as wholesale crockery

smashes, or a footman getting blind-drunk and charging a cheval-glass. All minor casualties and omissions throughout the household were ascribed to that boy's baleful influence.

When "the boy" was said to have left the tap running and flooded a bedroom carpet, there was no inquiring further. When the mutton came up raw, and "the boy" was said to have allowed the kitchen clock to get twenty minutes slow, the family felt that, this said, the subject was closed for ever. That boy represented a fate, a Nemesis, or, perhaps, better, the divine force of necessity. His "banshee" appearances were only when things had gone so extensively wrong that it became necessary to produce him corporally to the ruling powers for personal reproof; but we are bound to say, that it was only on the greatest disasters when the upper powers presumed

to tamper with this mysterious existence, or to drag so weird a creature into the vulgar daylight.

On this occasion the mere mention of this predestined and inevitable muffin-spoiler seemed to have calmed the Squire. His previous outbreak, too, had done him a world of good. So he told his other daughter, Mabel, that "she was a good gal for not flying out at her old father, like some folk did." And he went on playfully to remark that, "that beggar James looked as down in the mouth as if he were in love with two gals at once." Then, deriving great satisfaction from the uneasiness with which his victim had received this graceful *badinage*, he continued with great access of good-humour.

"Never mind what they say, James my boy, you'll do well yet for all their nonsense ; you'll marry money and be a dutiful

son, and a credit to your family, and keep the old name up among these cock-tail Addingham spinners. I've had my eye on a heiress for you this many a day, and her name don't begin the alphabet; and she won't have you perhaps, and there ain't some who look after her who would push it on—perhaps not. And I don't work for my children's interest, you ungrateful rascal."

"I can't help knowing whom you mean, father," said James hurriedly, and much annoyed, "but I hope you will not proceed further in this matter before we have talked it over many a time together. We must look at it in ever so many ways before I can take it in hand in real earnest;" thus James temporizing in utmost need. "Besides," he added, with an appeal to a weak point of his father's, "Do you think, Sir, that her fortune is safely invested? I have



heard that Dunt likes the financial companies." So James hardly pressed, and barely knowing what he was saying.

"You boys are all a shilly-shally lot, now-a-days," replied the Squire, with his bristles slightly rising again, "drinking tea at five o'clock like old 'oomen, and afraid to face a turnip field in showery weather. You're all timid about asking a gal to marry you, and drive about in close carriages. Why the gal can't eat you, James, you fool; I'll tell them to saddle the flea-bitten roan, and you shall canter over to-day and see how the land lies."

"I must really claim my right, father," said James, "of using my own discretion in this matter. All I can promise is, that if you will give me fair play and plenty of time, I will do my best to think over your scheme."

"I am sure James speaks fair enough"

chimed in Mrs. Butler, feeling with maternal instinct that her son was hard pressed. "I'm sure James is steady enough, and never sends us in any bills to pay. Why, you know, young Wilduck Drakes sent in his father a bill for sixty pounds in cigars and embroidered evening waistcoats at Eton before he was fourteen."

"Yes," said the Squire, bitterly, "they're steady enough these damned young muffs of the present day. I'd soon lick them out of their methodistical airs. And when they try to make men of spirit they haven't the constitutions to stand it, and break up at five-and-twenty. There was young Drakes, whom you're talking of; the only one of the boys I remember who liked his port wine bottle better than his tea-cup; well, what was the end of him? Broke down at thirty, and spent the last six months of his life in a Bath-chair. I went



to see him at the worst, for I felt he had tried to be a man at any rate and should be encouraged. Ah, poor fellow! he had been wheeled out to see a little ratting on the lawn, the only thing which the doctors found could freshen him up at all. And one particularly game rat he sent off to the village stuffers, and said he'd hang it in a glass case in his bedroom: always so fond of animals: but he never lived to see it framed up. Well, I sat and told him a few stories of fifty years back, and our carryings on in those days. And he seemed a kind of pleased, and asked for one about Jack Flint and the Marchioness twice over. 'Ah,' said he, pressing my hand when I'd done, 'we can't come it now, Squire, as you did; we've neither the fibre nor the imagination.' And I've always thought him a deuced sensible, well-conditioned boy ever since, tho' I never saw him again."

James had found by experience that any defence of his contemporaries only served to irritate the Squire into more angry denunciations of their degeneracy. In the present instance he rather welcomed this tirade as diverting the Squire's mind from the unwelcome marriage scheme. The Squire soon after went away to his office, and James to look after some new plantations; consequently Carry and Mrs. Butler fell to talking.

"I am sure papa cares a great deal more about James than he does about me," pouted Miss Carry; "but then I'm only a girl, and James is the hope of the family, and all that."

"Certainly, my dear," returned Mrs. Butler, "you have not the advantages of your cousin Agnes; but then she is the Lord Lieutenant's daughter, and, of course, goes to town every year. Yet you see



Agnes does not marry off very quickly, for all that. I take it a girl has nearly as good a chance in the country after all. The men are fewer, but they have less choice and more time."

"But what annoys me," said Carry, "is that at the county balls the men seem somehow to know one hasn't been up to London. I'm sure I read the *Morning Post* parties carefully enough to get up the names they are likely to talk about, but then one betrays oneself so often; and then these London office clerks somehow ask a country girl to dance as if they were all King Cophetuas, and we the female vagrants raised by their gracious notice."

"You have a very proper pride and sense of your position, dear," answered the mother; "no one can gainsay that. I wish your brother had half as much. He wants self-assertion most lamentably; he goes



into a farmhouse to tea, and will sit gossiping there quite at his ease, though what he finds to talk about I can't imagine. He's a good boy enough, though obstinate; but he need not have told Lady Teabury, the other day when she came over to luncheon, that he generally used an omnibus when he was in London, which wasn't often. What I say is, make the best of everything when speaking to fashionable people."

"I am sure James is very provoking at times," said Carry, "and brings us into great discredit. And, for all papa's confidence, I don't believe Jessie Amesham will look at James. Did you notice how she flirted with Mr. Perceval at Sir Wafer's dinner party? And he's better looking than James, and has a splendid place."

"I must say, dear," answered the mother, "you do Miss Amesham some injustice. I consider, though you know how particular

I am on those points, that she always behaves most quietly."

"And is a very great flirt for all that," laughed Carry, "and much more dangerous than a poor, noisy, giggling girl."

"How ill-natured you girls are to each other," Mrs. Butler continued, "and you watch each other like detectives. But if I think Miss Amesham is a nice, honest girl, I cordially wish King would have nothing to do with Mr. Harrup Dunt."

"How odd it is that when papa has quarrelled with nearly every soul in Slope-shire he should get on with Mr. Dunt. They are so very unlike. How came Mr. Dunt to be left Jessie's guardian?"

"Simply because her father had no one else for a relative in any degree of nearness," Mrs. Butler replied. "But the charge of an heiress is one which few men would relish, I should think. But if you

mean to go down to the village, Carry, it's high time you started. And, as you are up, just hand me the third volume of the 'Bigamist of the Andes,' and the first of 'Janet Shrubsole's Pattens,' and just mention to Thomas as you go out that Jane need not bring the dinner slate to me this morning, as I am comfortably settled now, and don't want to be disturbed."

The Squire, meanwhile, had issued forth to his office, where he now sat at the receipt of custom. A large man, with a rambling eye, and a heavy servile manner, by post, bailiff to the said Squire, was delivering his morning report. Blank and grim was the Squire's countenance as it proceeded, but the Squire's temper was better at business than in the bosom of his family. So Mr. Negus, agent and farm-bailiff, was enunciating his tidings somewhat after the manner of a penitential

psalm, pausing at times for the reply of the opposite choir, here represented by the Squire's strong interjections, and then resuming in the same monotone.

"When I come last Toosday forenoon I set in the house-place friendly to have no words, if so be as avoidable."

"Get on, Negus," from the Squire.

"'Fyvie,' says I, friendly, 'you lied to me the day afore yesterday in Ember market-place, so help me, which it was your own hay and straw you was gettin' away, and not your foster-brother's in Norfolk.'"

"Confounded bankrupt thief," from the Squire.

"'Negus,' says he, 'since you put it to me friendly, which lied I did, but the rent's safe for your good master, an' a striped stocking in a broken teapot which the asses-knees never got down into their inventory.'"

“Damned lies; I shan’t get a penny,” from the Squire.

“‘Fyvie,’ says I, ‘since ready it is, I’ll take it with me now, and save the ill-convenience of arter-callings.’

“‘Negus,’ says he, ‘it’s my mississ’s stocking, an’ tamper with it in her absinthe, it goes against me, Negus.’

“‘Fyvie,’ says I, ‘then, a respecting you as much as I do, I must repeat the Squire’s orders, which a thief you are, and a thief you will be, and your notice time wos up last Saturday, and move you must, as neither rent nor credit is either you or your asses-knees likely to perduce.’”

“By Gad, I’ll take the roof off that consummate blackguard,” from the Squire.

“‘Negus,’ says he, apressin’ my hand, ‘I esteem you an’ my worthy landlord afore almost anything, and that almost anything is the British Constitutum, which tells us

continual that a Englishman's 'ouse is his castle, and guns and pistils shall not dislodge me from mine.' Mr. Negus's voice scaled a note or two higher to deliver the ultimatum of the redoubtable Fyvie. Mr. Negus then shifted to another leg from that which he had occupied during the delivery of his dirge; the Squire brought the map of his estate down upon the office table with a loud bang by way of conclusion, and beckoning Negus grimly to follow him, the pair took the short field route to Ember.

James, meanwhile, had walked towards the plantations, and began with considerable dismay to review the present aspect of his affairs. His position at home was not a comfortable one. His allowance was small and uncertain, while he had been educated to all the tastes of a rich man. All these he had foregone of late years, for he had a horror of debt. Debt harassed and dis-

tressed him, so he had kept clear of it, but only by considerable privations in matters which youth considers as its right to possess. Now this self-denial had made him rather morbid and gloomy. He had never been happy at home since he grew up ; he had nothing in common with the Squire, who belonged to a bygone generation and tried all new things by his old standard. The morality and ideals, if such things they had, of the Squire's days were different to James's. Now James was a man of large and vague ideas, failing often in particulars, but thoroughly honest and unmercenary. James's strong points were the Squire's weak ones, so James was often sorely tried. Then, too, James had gone to college with too high an estimate of his own powers ; he had seen only the young men of his own provincial neighbourhood, and these he had scorned with an easy superiority. But at

the great university of Calf-bridge, James soon found his level, and that level in the test of academical honours was not a high one. He did not fail from want of industry, but from power of organizing and producing readily his knowledge. James had felt his failure deeply, he could not comfort himself like most men by laying that to idleness which he was obliged to ascribe to want of power. Hence he despaired of success in any line of life, and had thankfully accepted a dependent position at home, as a kind of head-bailiff virtually to his father in superintending the estate. In this he was contented enough, though by no means happy. The Squire was fractious, and James had absolutely no friends of his own age. Still it was a great matter to avoid being boxed up in London all the year round, his only other alternative. James was country-born and bred, and could not of free choice

breathe in London more than a fortnight. Moreover, he had ample time at Leece for a huge ill-digested mass of desultory reading. This did him some good, but a good deal of harm; so he had lived mostly on his own thoughts, and had not thriven remarkably in the process.

And so, late in life for a first love-affair, had fallen upon him this attraction to Mary. The key-note of its power upon him was its intense reality as contrasted with the book-phantoms among which he lived; and its not less intrinsic sincerity as contrasted with the conventionalities of his home life. Here he had to be always civil, always on his guard, always self-repressed. Mary and he felt so sure of each other that they even quarrelled a little at times. For the first time in his life he lived *in the present*. And this was surely a mighty revelation to one who had hitherto had so little sense of the

immediate. It was then its actuality and freedom from all miserable convention that gave his passion for a not remarkably pretty and half-educated girl such intense power over a refined and highly educated man. These lovers had little in common except their love. Poor Mary often spelt very simple words wrongly ; and James had reached the differential calculus, and could write fair Greek prose. But education cannot improve and want of education cannot touch the original elements of human nature.

But at first, be it confessed, James had cared much more for Mary than she for him. She was flattered by the notice of one whom she felt her superior, nothing more. Besides, James was an ugly man. But there is compensation in this as in all things ; for, as after living a month in sight of a fair landscape we hardly notice its fairness, so after living a year facing a

blank wall we do not care for its ugliness. So, as Mary began to like James more, she had quite forgotten whether he was ugly or handsome ; while his stronger nature insensibly began to subdue hers into being, if anything, more in love than he was. So it had come about that James was at times positively afraid of the power he had over Mary. And so it was that the Squire's foolish mercenary talk that morning at breakfast became as gall and worm-wood to James as he walked through the lavish May-morning to inspect the young plantations.

CHAPTER V.

MARY AND HER HOME SURROUNDINGS.

“ She sighs among her narrow days,
Moving about the household ways
In that dark house where she was born.
The foolish neighbours come and go,
And tease her till the day draws by.”

AMOS WESTON, draper of Whinbury, occupied a tolerably spacious tenement in the main street of that city. The basement story was entirely devoted to the purposes of the shop. And on this it was both the pride and privilege of Mr. Toby Blick, the apprentice, to permanently attend. Amos Weston was a fat oily man, in a suit of ill-made black, very white at the seams. He

had small grey eyes, with no eye-brows, and very light hair, a long, tight-drawn upper lip, and a cruel-looking, determined mouth. He had a kind of fawning manner which was extremely disagreeable. He was stout, and held himself stiffly, and so much upright that he rather seemed bent back, as he strutted along in his walk. His hair was thin, and was brushed back quite smooth to his head. He was attending, when we first make his acquaintance, upon Mrs. Major Shanter, one of his most distinguished customers, who had, as such, come in her own private carriage. This was outside, and many of the junior population of Whinbury stood gazing upon a naked man on the panels, which formed the Shanter crest. The coachman, elated by the popularity of his reception, was trying to infuse some appearance of spirit into the horses by lashing them about the

head, and jerking their mouths with the reins, but those quadrupeds seemed too depressed to resent even these insults. Mrs. Major Shanter was fastidious in her shopping, as it behoves all ladies of consideration to be. Her purchases were never large, but then the distinction she conferred on the establishment by keeping her carriage outside was great. At length, after unpacking half of Weston's stock, and purchasing three yards of merino and some cap ribbon, she re-ascended her chariot's steps, among the acclamations of the erratic urchins of the town, and Weston hurried in to his long-deferred dinner in no very gentle humour with his distinguished customer.

The family party comprised Leah Weston, a very stiff-backed woman of forty-five, with a stony eye, and thin lips. And the three daughters, Mary, Jane, and Catty,

quite a child. Toby Blick, the apprentice, was also privileged to attend, but more in the character of waiter than of guest.

“ Ah, you’re late, Amos, with that Shanter,” sympathised Mrs. Weston, “ she touches and chooses for half-an-hour before she’ll buy a half-penny boot-lace. She brings her carriage to be sure, but we loose upon what she takes, I’m certain, in wear and tear of other goods.”

“ True,” replied Weston, “ she is tedious, but then old Magin, the church draper, don’t know how little she buys, and it vexes him her coming. I see him standing like an old ferret at his shop-door as I put her parcel in : and she asked after my pretty daughter, that’s Mary, quite friendly like agoing. Weston, says she, I’ve took a fancy to that girl.”

“ Mary is too fond of making people notice her,” answered Mrs. Weston sternly.

"In my time the less a girl was seen the more she was thought after. There's others, too, that notices Mary as little to my mind as Mrs. Shanter, and it's not ladies they is, tho' maybe they gives themselves out for gentlemen, since all the gentility they ever saw could be covered up in a broken sarse-pan in my appinium." This with a withering sneer.

"Leave the girl alone, Leah," said Weston, "and eat your dinner without teasing at any one. I suppose you had your sweethearts when you was a young one."

"And you a been to chapel last Sunday, Amos, to give me this worldly talk at after; and ready enough as Mary is, without your tellin' her, to forget her dooty to me and the ten commandments, and Mr. Baruch warning us continual that girls that took delight in adorning themselves with

their wicked fineries to catch men, was the next things to infidels and Romanists."

"Let the girl alone, wife, an' mind your beans an' bacon," answered the draper. "Why Mary's your own daughter, I'll be bound, in knowing the difference between half-a-crown and a pocket-counter. If this young chap turns out without expectations of any sort, she's sense enough to shake him off in one afternoon; ay, and clever enough to see soon how the land lies; ain't you, Molly, my girl?"

Poor Mary, annoyed beyond measure at having her love dragged into this rough family banter, could only redden and cry, and redden and cry again, at the bare idea of her giving up James if he turned out ever so reprobate or penniless.

Mrs. Weston replied, "Have your own way, Weston, and whatever comes, I wash my hands on't. Would the gal look at Bill

Richards last year, and him with a father a leading man here and an elder of our own persuasion? He isn't the first accountant in Whinbury for nothing; the business that goes through his hands is enormous. I went yesterday to ast him to subscribe to our tea-drinkin' for our united wrestlers in the faith. And young Richards havin' the unknown tongues when he was eighteen months and upwards arter measles, and being sullen too at times, and strange even now in consequence, a lad as any gal might be proud of; with a sure competence in his father's business, and tolerable well thought on in the town, as rattings and such comes to boys of sperrit natural, and he'll soon put away all such levities when settled with a wife as knows how to make him mind her. And then for our Mary not to be content with such, and she to come to me with her fine-lady airs, and say she



didn't like Richards because he was so greedy and made such noises over his wittal; as if he hadn't a right to make noises, with all the money his father can put down. Get along, Miss, I'm tired on you."

Poor Mary thought, would the dinner never be over; but she could slip down immediately afterwards to Sarah Webb and have a good cry and get some comfort, for this married sister really understood her. But, after an interval of beans, Mrs. Weston came to the charge again like a giant refreshed, for Richards had been her especial favourite, and she was still sore over this matter.

"And what do you know certain about this sweetheart of yours except all his swaggering lies, maybe, about himself? Did he ever shew you sister, brother, or father of his? Did you ever see the house

he rented, or the bank where all his fine money lies? Why, you silly girl, and they tell me he isn't even a well-favoured young man, and his coat couldn't have been new this year or last. I call it flying in the face of providence to keep company with such."

But Mary has left the room in great tribulation, and the draper, who has come to his cheese, was now scrutinizing a very mildewed piece on the edge of his knife with intense anxiety. He turned the cheese over and round again, but still some problem seemed to be perplexing him; at last, with a look of some dismay, he laid down his knife still loaded.

"Why, wife," he said; "why, woman, what's this? I do believe Mary really *cares* for him."

"It's my firm mind," muttered Mrs. Weston grimly, "Mary don't rightly know whom she cares about."

Here Toby Blick went down to the shop, having been trained by long practice to detect the entrance of a customer from almost inaudible distances.

But it was not a customer this time, but no less a personage than Mr. Richards, senior, accountant, and elder of the Limited Methodists in Whinbury. He was high in the good graces of Mrs. Weston, and much looked up to by Amos; so, on his joining them over their cheese and beer, the remaining girls and the apprentice were at liberty to follow their own devices. But some time since had Mary slipped on her bonnet, half-crying, to run down to Mrs. Webb's for comfort.

The Whinbury High Street was not an invigorating prospect, for a slight drizzle had come on; nor was the sight of the younger Richards pacing the pavement encouraging. He had followed his father



to Weston's shop, but knew too well the kind of reception Mary would give him to venture upstairs. The elder Richards meanwhile had come about some commercial transaction, for the two fathers had money in some local ventures together; about these Richards mainly came, but he generally ended by putting in a side word for his son, which Mrs. Weston always duly retailed to Mary afterwards, with many bitter reflections on her daughter's stubbornness.

When Mary came out in the drizzle she had to pass Richards, which she did with merely "a good afternoon," while the wretched, overdressed youth immediately afterwards slunk down a side alley to bemoan his feelings in company with a heap of decayed straw and a cock and two hens who were scraping thereon.

Mary arrived all in a flutter at Mrs.

Webb's, whom she found mending her children's clothes, with Webb out. She then began to cry again, but it is a different thing crying in the company of one sympathetic sister and before the whole unsympathetic family audience; therefore there was now a certain luxury in being able to cry as much as she liked, and talk freely about James.

"Oh, Sarah dear, they've been so bad to me at home, at dinner again, about James. I feel so different with them to what I do with you or with James. Father and mother accuse me of wishing such dreadful mean things that never once have come into my head before they say them."

"What have they said against you to-day," asked Sarah Webb, "my poor, little, innocent sister, with all your troubles beginning?"

"They say I only like James because I



think he will turn out rich, and that I should get rid of him if he was to turn out poor; and then they kept bringing up that dreadful Will Richards against me, and there he was pacing about outside the door as I came here."

"Well, but we two, and James too, know all this is not true of my pretty. So why should you let it vex you if they say it?" consoled Sarah Webb.

"And then they are always at it, that I ought not to trust myself with James, because they are respectable folk, and of religious connections; but how is it I feel a deal safer with James than with any of them? I know James is good, and I would trust him—oh! how much! I'm sure he is a great deal better than me, for I vex and worrit him sadly at times, and he so good to me with it all."

"My dear Mary," said Sarah, affection-

ately, "you are a poor, good little thing very much in love, and so James seems to you everything perfect; but I think he cannot be very bad, all the same, or else my little sister, who is a good little girl, would never have got to like him."

"Oh, Sarah, if you knew him only, you wouldn't question that."

"But what do you know about him, Mary dear?" said Sarah, gently. "Mind, I don't doubt him, for I married Webb without knowing one of his kith and kin. You fancy he is a gentleman?"

"He half confessed as much to me once or twice, but then he continual tells me that he is very poor; so I can't make it out, for I thought all gentlefolks were rich; but I know he is not happy at home no more than me."

"I suppose his people must have been gentlefolks, and got ruined, as that would

make them not happy at home and him poor," suggested the more worldly-acute Sarah. "And he must be in some London business now. Perhaps Webb could find out for us; he talks of going to London soon."

"Oh don't, Sarah dear," entreated Mary; "I am so happy with him now in spite of all their scoldings at home; and suppose he should turn out some one too grand for me after all, as in the novel books; oh, it would be dreadful."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEMBER FOR THE COUNTY, AND WHO
CALLED ON HIM.

“Virtue!—to be good and just—
Every heart when sifted well,
Is a clot of warmer dust,
Mix’d with cunning sparks of hell.”
The Vision of Sin.

A ONE-HORSE CHAISE was winding along a Slopeshire lane about eleven in the morning, and this contained Mr. Luke Webb, the rising attorney of Whinbury. He had encased his throat in a comforter, although it was May, as a comforter answered to a kind of full dress on an important expedition with Mr. Luke. The horse went

along at a good swinging pace, and communicated a kind of rolling motion to the high-wheeled trap behind him. Altogether, Mr. Webb resembled a commercial traveller vaunting the wares of his house in a provincial progress.

“My luck again,” muttered he, “to have this young Perceval rooting me out; my luck all over; and this is a nice expedition I’m bound on now, and an honourable—to get a clue towards frightening this inoffensive M.P. out of his wits. You’re a hard customer, Mr. Perceval, and a merciless. I know the breed of you and your old Jew father well enough. No faltering with either if you want anything. But why, in the name of Mammon, should young Perceval wish to ape these squires now? He has more brains than they, and yet I fancy they give him rather a cold shoulder at times. Why on earth should

he wish to get into their dull sets, and perhaps marry one of their languid, idiotic daughters, when he might be pushing a magnificent business at Addingham with his capital? I suppose there's a key to this nonsense as there is to everything, but it's beyond me, and all I've got to do now is to obey orders, and think about Plumptre and his possible circumvention. Well, I may as well glance over again those notes Perceval left me. I know they are mere guesses upon a given character—shrewd enough though—and indications of the direction my researches are to take. Here are three distinct lines for working upon to begin with, founded on Mr. Scarsley's probable or supposed failings. As each lode appears hopelessly unmetallic I am to abandon it, and begin number two, and so down the list."

Here Webb elevated his voice to cry

“gate,” for he had come, after a longish jaunt of some thirteen Slopeshire miles, opposite the woods of that imposing residence, Limedale House, and abreast of Mr. Scarsley Plumpton’s lodge; now the first qualifications of a squire’s lodge-keeper are always understood to be decrepitude and deafness, so some little delay occurred before Webb was admitted. Thence the tall quadruped jolted and snorted up a scrubby avenue of thirty years old limes, still in their boxes of wood-fence, looking as if they had been tumbled out of a child’s toy-box. Thence through a smaller ill-hinged iron gate, over a rood of a damp, crunching gravel, and finally Webb proclaimed his arrival by a self-asserting tug at a metal bell-handle under a portico of doric columns painted green.

“Tell Mr. Plumpton a constituent wishes to see him on particular business. Say, Mr.

Webb, young man, solicitor, from Whinbury. Here's the card, and look alive."

Webb made it a point never to be abashed by the splendours of a plush footman. He knew this gentry always bullied you, if you didn't bully them at first, so he preferred the initiative.

Mr. Plumpton would be happy to see him. Mr. Plumpton sat alone with a bust of Mr. Pitt and several blue-books. Bachelors' rooms are generally untidy, but Mr. Plumpton's was a model of neatness. The *County Herald* lay on his desk, with an evident excision in it of some speech of the honourable member's. A large portfolio and a bottle of gum told the speech had been duly transferred to a carefully-kept archive of Mr. Plumpton's life. Know, therefore, O Slopeshire and Slopeshirians, that none of this man's words, nay, not the least of them, shall fail! he is none of your

democratic mushrooms, due to the stump and the barrel, saying red one day and singing blue the next, but a thoroughly consistent man: consistent, yet withal a man of progress, not a wild bull-in-the-china-shop progress, but rather the well adjusted progress of an infant in a perambulator.

"I have taken a considerable liberty in calling," said Mr. Webb, in his smoothest manner: "knowing how fully occupied must be the time of a Slopeshire representative; especially such a one as the celebrated Mr. Plumpton: but the urgency of my business must be my excuse."

"Pray, take a chair, Mr. Webb," said Plumpton, much propitiated by this exordium. "I am busy, it is true, for when am I not? But my time is always at the service of my constituents."

Now Mr. Plumpton, into whose presence we have ushered the intrusive Webb, was

a light-haired young-looking man of about forty. He was tall, weak-chested, and slimly built : his forehead was high, and he was partially bald : he had an irresolute hesitating way of speaking, and stooped a little as he walked.

Webb resumed : "I will go straight into the matter. I am a solicitor, whose name has probably reached you." Mr. Plumpton bowed. "I have a considerable connection with Addingham. You have, no doubt, heard that city is determined to wrest one of their seats from the squires at the next general election."

"God bless me!" exclaimed Plumpton, pale at the very mention of such a contingency, which was an entire fabrication of Webb's, to excuse his coming. "Why, Mr. Slowaneasy, my agent, gave me to understand, not a month ago, that my vote on the meal and bran question had



given unmitigated satisfaction in Addingham."

"Well, I assure you," said Webb, "that yesterday in Addingham I mentioned to a confidential friend, Noles of the wire trade, that I should come and warn you of the enemy's movements. 'Don't go,' said he, 'you'll get no thanks, Mr. Plumpton knows it all a vast deal better than you.' 'I'll go,' said I, 'and risk it. I don't pretend to be a disinterested man, but give me a country gentleman rather than a spinner for my money.'"

"Dear, dear, Mr. Webb, you absolutely amaze me. Why, I'll telegraph to Slowaneasy at once." And Plumpton leaned forward towards the bell-rope.

"Hear out my story first, Mr. Plumpton," continued Webb. "I am not at liberty to mention names, but I'll speak so plainly that you with your extensive local infor-

mation will be at no loss to supply them. A certain gentleman of Addingham has long had his eye on this berth of yours. He knows all the ins and outs of you squires, for he has rented a place in the thick of you some years past. Well, this is their man, and I need name no names. Do you take me, sir?" concluded Webb, who had not the least notion whom he referred to, but who trusted the jealous fears of a county representative to light surely on some unoffending head.

Scarsley had at once in his eye two or three men answering to Webb's purposely vague description, so he at once declared he knew his probable antagonist, and asked Webb to stay to luncheon in a most cordial manner, thinking at the same time that Slowaneasy was plainly getting past his electioneering, and this might be the very man to replace him. Webb's sharp eye

had meanwhile examined every visible inch of the room for any possible clue to Plumpton's tastes, and hence, of course, to Plumpton failings. Item, blue-books, a very forest of blue-books, but that might be a blind. A view of Glastonbury over the chimney-piece. Clearly no help in that : Sir Talboys Plumpton, *ætatis* nineteen, in a ruff opposite ; worse and worse. The statistics of crime open on the table, neatly bound in calf, with copious annotation : looks like a scent this, but never would have been left about had it meant anything. Besides, statistical information was drink and meat to Plumpton. He was omnivorous, Webb knew, in this respect.

As to the hope of extracting anything in conversation, Webb knew it would be worse than useless to venture any attempt at the faintest cross-examination so early in their acquaintance. A man like Plumpton

seldom talked freely, even to an equal, and any digression from the merest commonplace in a country attorney would be taken ill at once. So at the conclusion of a roast rabbit and certain slices of meat from the servants' joint, for Plumpton was stingy and abstemious, and this Webb noted with dismay—the emissary knew as little as ever of the member. One point might be scored to Webb's favour, he had established a most favourable impression for proper deference to his superiors combined with evident shrewdness for business, two attributes seldom united in one individual, as Plumpton mentally regretted, in these degenerate days. In fine, Webb was honoured with two fingers from the legislator on taking his leave, and Plumpton said he would further communicate with him when he had seen Mr. Slowaneasy.

The young man in plush, with a beery



look about the eyes, stood ready to let Webb out. He even accepted half-a-crown from the lawyer with great condescension. Webb loitered a while to engage him in conversation, and winked quite gravely at him as a way of setting him at once at his ease.

"Why, what are you adoing of that for?" said the young man in plush, fearing that he was about to be taken at a disadvantage somehow, and feeling himself unequal to cope with Webb, whom he distrusted as a lawyer, so soon after dinner.

"I'm a doing that," said Webb, gracefully accommodating, after his habit, his dialect to his company, "for wonder that so fine a young man as you should thrive so on the very small order of wittal you must ha' just got down there."

"I say, now," said John, much impressed, "whoever a told you that? Does

it seem to be telling on me, tho' ?" he added hurriedly ; " why, I know'd I was a falling away ; an' for strangers to notice it, I must be wasting like suet."

" You are wasting, my fine feller," Webb continued ; " and it's clean agin Parliament and the Bill of Rights for this file Plumpton to keep yer so low."

" It's not my figure I mind," insisted John, impressively ; " for I've other things than figure to depend upon ; but it's the meanness. I expect it's that that is a hurting of me : I'm over sensitive ; that's where it is."

" Ah ! he's a regular out-and-outer for closeness, is your guv'ner. Now, you wooden' guess my business to-day with him, not you. Well, I don't mind telling you, as I like the set of your hair at first I see you. I'm a dealer in flints, and I've come to buy up all the skins he's got off

'em during the past month, to make up into strait waistcoats."

"You're gammoning me," faltered John, much bewildered by recent ale and the rapidity of Webb's conversational powers. "You'd better not a go for to try that on, for I won't abear it."

"Don't you go and take my fun wrong;" was the reply, as Webb found that he rated too high the humouristic powers of John, "You're too sharp at taking anything: that's what you are, with your over-sensitiveness: it's a great gift, Sir, but you'll find it often in your way through life: I never see such a chap for being down upon a cove: it's readiness I call it, that's where it is."

"Well, I was considered one of the readiest boys at my school," replied the other mollified. "If I'd had half Plump-ton's eddication and crammin, I should ha'

been in the parliament line myself by this time, I dessay."

"You'd have found it limited and vexatious, my good friend," said Webb, who began to appreciate John's idiotcy more every moment; "it's only your clockwork, steady-going chaps like Plumpton that can stand it long; yet I'll wager that this master of yours has his breaks-out now and then, when he's safe away in town; human nature couldn't stand it else with the life he leads."

"He break out?" answered John, with great contempt; "I'd respect that man if I thought he wore ever free-hearted enough to get brought home muzzy: but it's not in him, Sir: I suppose nature ain't endowed all on us; and we may pity but musn't look down on others. Break out? Not he: why if ever I see grimy and slimy lodgings, with no creature comforts

but a fire-screen and a stuffed-bird case, Plumpton's is the very identical."

"You said in Tilney Street, I believe ;" said Webb.

"Then I'm afraid your hearing apparatus is gone out of order ; for I said Portlock Street if I said anythin', and a better street for a dozen suicides I never see, let alone an ink-vest."

"To be sure you did, 24, Portlock Street, I was only a wandering off on suthin' else ; never mind me, it's my way," said Webb.

"Then don't wander no more and adun with it," interposed John, with a heated face. "Why I said 16 as plain as might be, and you go a turnin' of it to 24. What ever is a come over you, old chap ?"

"Don't be so cruel hard on me with your sharpness," said Webb. "Old Plump-ton has just tired me out, and I ain't fresh

enough for your intellect: but whenever you're down Whinbury way you'll find a quiet pipe and corner at my office in the High Street, for it's a pleasure brightening oneself up by speaking with a man like you. I don't mind saying, in confidence, I'm uncommon particular in my friends."

John replied that whenever his master took him to Whinbury he generally devoted his leisure to the Three Greyhounds, but he had no objection to accede to Mr. Webb's polite suggestion; as, he added with much humour though less grammatical accuracy, "stood drink agreed with him better nor paid." He cautioned Webb to get his nag in himself at the stables, as there was nothing to be made out of the stupidity of the boy there. The two then parted, with many expressions of mutual esteem.

"Not much," muttered Webb as he

jolted home; "but about as much as I expected. Portlock Street is now the word, I suppose, but I hardly think it's worth the railway fare, let alone the loss of time. Still I'm rather warmer in my detective harness than when I set out this morning: a little difficulty is an agreeable tonic, and the very unlikeliness of the thing gives it a certain zest. I shouldn't like Sally to get wind of the present employment of her rising solicitor; what a scamp I was before I settled! I don't know, though, every man's hand was against me, and I hadn't a halfpenny: therefore I couldn't be expected to keep all the cardinal virtues cut and dried about my premises."

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. BUTLER'S DAUGHTERS AND MRS. BUTLER'S
SISTERS.

“She feared her spinster sister in their hall,
 Lined with the canvas faces of past squires,—
 Great squires, each in his narrow walk supreme,
 Lord of the hind and acres at their gate;
 They drank, bred, hunted their allotted time,
 Then gave the parish church one hatchment more.”

Old Play.

It was high noon at Leece Court, but a profound stillness and sleepiness seemed to pervade that mansion. The Squire was off at a magistrates' meeting, that admirable invention of Britannia Felix for providing country gentlemen with some shadow of an employment. James had gone, ostensibly

to see a college friend in orders, in the Whinbury direction ; the two young ladies, Mab and Carry, were in a little sitting-room of their own at the top of the house. Carry was cleaning a pair of kid gloves, and had been taking to pieces an old silk gown, the *disjecta membra* of which lay on floor, on chair, and on table like a Chinese puzzle, defying any male ingenuity to put them together again. Mab was a young lady with a correspondence, which occupied nearly her whole leisure, and with the importance and punctuality of which she much impressed both herself and her family. This consisted in a compact between herself and some half-dozen female friends that they should sedulously write to each other every other day at least four sides of note-paper about nothing whatever, and reply by return of post on a similar subject.

To this effect her pen is running on



across a sheet of thinnest paper to Mrs. Major Shanter, who lives some nine miles off, at Clova Grange, on the Whinbury road, and whom she sees on an average about once a week:

“ MY DEAR CLARA,

“ We go on living here in the same humdrum way. Papa is quite too tiresome, and James is so quiet and absent that I am sure he is keeping something from us. Have you seen Mr. P—— these last few days? I met him riding in a lane near here, and he turned the conversation at once to a certain cousin of mine. I am, however, quite sure that Agnes does not care one pin about him. You know he is not good *ton*, and I believe his father was something quite low. Naturally, he wants to marry for connection, and I don't think he looks upon Agnes Aston in any



other light than a suitable investment, as these commercial people say. I own he is most good-looking, but then he never seems quite at his ease, and is rather too elaborate in his civilities for the fashion of the present day, when all the best men are notoriously rather rude. I always keep fancying that Mr. Perceval is referring mentally to some etiquette-book he has got at home whenever he hands one a chair, or opens the door for one on leaving the room. I know you like him better than I do—indeed I half suspect that your friend Miss Jessie admires him just a little; so I hope you will not tell her my views: but I don't think I am too severe. She is a happy girl in having so much which makes her sought after, while I am a penniless and embarrassed squire's daughter. I suppose I shall never get anything better than a curate to be civil to me."

[Here we omit two pages and a half not material to the present narrative.]

“ Our two old aunts come to lunch to-day. I shall be heartily glad when this state ceremony is over. Poor mamma is always perfectly exhausted with them before they have done. I fancy I hear the crunch of their wheels now, so

“ Believe me

“ Your affectionate

“ MABEL BUTLER.

“ Is there any respectable draper's shop in Whinbury at which you could get me a little of the plainest mouse-coloured Irish poplin? You are near enough to do your shopping there. But thirteen miles would be no joke to our decrepid coachman and the feeble creatures he flogs along. Our stupid Ember ‘ general warehouse ’ has literally nothing but slate-pencils and red-herrings. Still they profess great readiness



to order you anything from a new magazine to a lace-bonnet; but then neither arrive till they are each quite out of date, and you have forgotten you ever wanted them. It was not aunt's carriage after all."

The sound which the young lady had at first put down to the expected arrival of her aunts proved, on its nearer approach, to be only a step upon the stairs, followed by a hand upon the door.

"Here comes mamma!" cried Carry. "She never will leave one a morning in peace."

Mrs. Butler entered with a novel in one hand and a household duster in the other. She had a way of carrying more things than she could manage at once, and dropping them all over the house, where the "boy" and Paragreen had to re-find them with great care and harass. Mrs. Butler

was very asthmatic, and had a perpetual cold in her head.

“I’m sure how King expects me to keep up a position with all this against me, I don’t know,” whimpered Mrs. Butler; “and here are Barbara and Amelia coming every minute, and I know Thomas won’t be back with the lump-sugar from Ember in time to open the door, and I hear that spiteful Shanter has been saying that we only live on what our creditors allow us as it is. If we could only get the carriage out and drive through Ember, it might have a good effect; but that tiresome animal with the raw side never intends to heal, and of course the lady of Leece Court couldn’t go through her market-town with one horse—not to be thought of!”

“I’m not coming down to be scolded by aunts Amelia and Bab!” said Miss Carry, rebelliously.

"I won't have Mrs. Shanter abused!" added Miss Mabel. "She is the only soul fit for us to speak to for miles. I'm sure she never said that about us."

"Why on earth," pursued Miss Carry, querulously, "need you be so civil to aunts? Why don't you stand up to them, mamma, and give it them back? You know the nasty old things would have married a butcher or baker, with all their fine airs, if the ghost of a man had ever asked them."

"There you go again," faltered Mrs. Butler piteously, eyeing alternately each of her daughters; "my own girls go and turn against me after all I've done for them. I must keep well with my own family. You know that half our standing in the county comes from my people. Why you see Mrs. Slime Grumpton would never have sent me those early nectarines and

pine-apples if I hadn't been an honourable."

"Well, all I know is," interrupted Miss Carry, "that honourable or not, we are cooped up here all the year round and don't see a soul: when I think of all the ugly girls who have their three months in town and a ball every night, I could grind my teeth with vexation."

"Come, Carry, don't be fractious," said Mrs. Butler, "you would have got few better than Mr. Plumpton if you had been out in town for half-a-dozen seasons; and I'm sure there's no doubt what he thinks about a certain young lady."

"I think there is very great doubt, indeed," pouted Miss Carry, twisting one of her long curls round her finger; "I fancy it will all end in smoke like the last. I'm sick of being interested in statistics, and crime, and drunkards, and all those other

horrid creatures they put in reformatories, and who run away again. I tell you, I don't mean to subside so quietly as Mab into a disappointed being, and think of nothing but cipher-collecting and a correspondence."

"Ah, Carry, you're high-spirited enough now," said Mab, looking up from her letters and speaking sententiously; "but you'll see things differently when you're as old as I."

"Look at Mab's resignation, isn't it beautiful?" insisted Mrs. Butler; "you discontented girl, and after all that she's gone through, poor dear; ah, there's few girls have had such a disappointment, or their feelings trifled with to such an extent, and to come out so beautifully with it all."

We must remark, parenthetically, that this "disappointment" which Miss Mab came out not a little on among her fe-

male friends, and which she continually flourished at them, had arisen in this wise : A young man in the county, of the name of Wafflers, with a weak wandering eye, close brushed hair, and feeble legs, the nephew and heir presumptive to a neighbouring baronet, had drifted, sorely against his will, into the Ember infirmary ball. From sheer vacuity, and being too shy to stand out, he had asked Miss Mabel twice to dance and then fled for the night to the lower regions of ostlers and gin and water. But Mrs. Butler had marked him for her own, and the next day he was asked to Leece Court. This inoffensive youth was much surprised and troubled by the note. He mistrusted his powers of literary composition, and finally decided that an acceptance required less imagination to indite than a refusal. He duly appeared at Leece Court, where he was so frightened at being the only male

among three ladies, that at times a sense of his position became too much for him, and he would take refuge for long hours among the shrubberies in fine weather, and in an old barn in stormy. In these periods of retirement he would try and harden his brain sufficiently to invent an excuse for getting away ; but beyond a fabrication that his uncle had sent for him about his will, and that he must go and see about his game certificate, neither of which excuses seemed tenable on mature revision, no ray of imagination gave to this unhappy young man any hope of shortening the inexorable fortnight on which Mrs. Butler said she had calculated on his staying. The last three days of which he, having grown quite acclimatized to the shrubberies, and seeing deliverance at hand, became more cheerful and easy in his mind, but the trials of the visit's end made its beginning seem

by comparison a blessed repose. He then began to be much harassed and not a little puzzled by Miss Mab bursting into tears at the family meals, without any obvious cause or previous warning. His three bold and original hypotheses of wasps, colic, and tight-lacing, as accounting for these mysterious attacks, gave no real comfort to his mind. And when the young lady had been led forth in state by her mother, who returning said pointedly to him, "that girls in her state were always so," he felt that the wasp hypothesis must be dismissed for ever. His gigantic intellect became also aware, that if by any accident he found himself in Miss Mab's proximity, the mother and sister had a mysterious tendency of melting away which was not earthly: in fact, all this preyed upon his mind to such an extent that within a day of his fortnight's termination, after nearly an entire twelve hours in the shrub-

berries, sustained only by a few black-berries, he got on the turnpike road ; where a passing baker offering him a lift, seemed to him like a heaven-sent deliverer. He fled from Leece Court leaving the whole of his wardrobe, two hair-brushes, and a boot-jack, a lasting moral to the Butlers, Mrs. Shanter, and Slopeshire gossip generally of the black perfidy of man. Mrs. Butler ignominiously cast forth his portmanteau on the steps of the Blue Cow, Ember, where the fatal infirmity ball had been held, and she had first seen this monster. Here it was sold a month afterwards by the host (for Wafflers never had the courage to reclaim it) to pay expenses by public auction, in company with a liver-coloured pointer, the only available asset of an insolvent bagman.

After this long parenthesis, which we trust has not been wholly uninformative, we return to the main current of this his-

tory, and the cumbrous vehicle of the Misses Barbara and Amelia Aston which visibly now hove in sight. This chariot was a curious relic of feudalism, having been built for Lord Dobbleton on his marriage tour early in the present century. It stood very high on its wheels, and reminded one of Boadicea's car. Both horses and servants seemed rather stiff in their joints, rather rusty in their coats. But there was a strange rumbling sound which proceeded from the springs of this vehicle whenever it moved, which was truly awful and imposing, suggestive of Juggernaut and other weird associations.

Mrs. Butler always came to the door to receive her unmarried sisters: she held them and their opinions in vast deference: to her they represented the peerage, while she was only a squire's wife.

Miss Amelia Aston was plethoric, scant

of breath, sententious. Miss Barbara Aston was a little dried-up body, fiery and uncompromising. Both were any age between fifty and sixty. Miss Barbara always carried a large reticule with hard and strange protuberances, and an impracticable mouth, contracted by a kind of knotted bell-rope. Miss Amelia was continually mislaying her handkerchief, and when not somnolent generally hungry.

"Don't stand one minute in the draught here, my dears," bustled Mrs. Butler. "Thomas, take out the foot-warmer, and the boy will attend to the cushions. It's so good of you to come: I thought that shower of ten minutes would have frightened your coachman."

"Good God, Flavia," said Miss Amelia, pettishly, "how long are we to inspect your sub-hall. I'm sure I've seen those hats and umbrellas a dozen times. They

ain't by Sir Joshua Reynolds, are they?" The good lady's temper was always shaken up like fine sherry by a drive. But Mrs. Butler was only meek and tearful under the asperities of her distinguished relatives.

"I'm sure, sister, I was leading you in as fast as I could, and no one so glad to see you as I; there's a nice fire in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Paragreen shall take up your boa and seal skins. You'll bring down the stuffed badger and the Indian knives if you hang your things there, Barbara: dear, dear, I wish we had a little more room in this house. But come along, dears, come along. That's only James's new dog: it means he has taken a fancy to you both by his barking so violently: he goes up quite silently when he means to bite any one. If you can get him to bark first he's quite safe."

Mrs. Paragreen advances curtseying with

a load worthy of a vessel of the Hudson Bay Company.

"Is his lordship and her ladyship and family quite well? That's well. Is Miss Amelia and Miss Barbara quite well? That's well. A beautiful day you've got for your drive, but rainy."

And Paragreen, housekeeper-in-chief, retires, having fulfilled the respectful amenities of life to a turn.

Miss Barbara bounces into an old satin chair on one side the fire; Miss Amelia subsides into its pendant on the other. The covers are always taken off the furniture when the Honourable Misses Aston are expected.

"Well, Flavia," commences Miss Barbara, "why ain't the girls down? changing their dresses, I suppose. I suppose their aunts ain't worth being punctual about. I suppose King is out as usual. I never

expected him to be at home to receive us. Though it was a fine feather in his cap the day he got you, Flavia, to marry him with your position ; why, his people only bought land here in King Richard's time, and we've been here since King John : I wonder Dobbleton let you throw yourself away, my dear."

"Well," chimed in Miss Amelia, "I say this, a woman's first duty is to keep up her position. Dobbleton said to me yesterday, 'Would you object to call on the new curate's (Mr. Smoothboy's) wife?' No one can call me haughty, and I would meet her, and even shake hands with her, at a school feast, or even after service, for then she is in an official position, as it were. No one can call me proud ; but as to calling—excuse me, Dobbleton—no. When I was young the chaplain came in to say grace, and then went to dine in the house-

keeper's room, and played Pope Joan with the ladies'-maids afterwards. Whether the Church was in its proper place then or now is no business of mine; but, as to calling, I am safe in drawing the line there."

"Dear me!" said poor Mrs. Butler, "it's all very well for you, the Lord Lieutenant's sisters, to keep up your position, as it comes easy and natural to you; but what with King selling his peaches, and eels, and rabbits, we are not so looked up to as we were. I declare Spruce, the Ember grocer, gave me quite a familiar nod as I drove through last Friday, but then his bill is overdue, and they say he has hired a little shooting of his own, and is setting up for a gentleman. It's all very shocking, this mixture of classes, and decay of respect for superiors, but I'm sure it's not my fault."

"Why did you let your girls dance with

young Perceval at the last assembly?" sternly propounded Miss Barbara.

"Why did you call upon Mrs. Slime Grumpton in the iron trade, who has taken that villa outside there?" responded Miss Amelia from the antiphonal side of the fireplace.

"When the aristocracy let themselves down, how can the middle classes be expected to respect them?" insisted Miss Barbara.

"This comes of marrying beneath one's station, and becoming gradually deteriorated by daily contact with inferior people," concluded Miss Amelia.

Both ladies paused for breath, and Mrs. Butler, with several sniffs and a deep sigh, metaphorically rose to reply :

"As for young Perceval, Dobbleton shouldn't have made him a magistrate, and then he would have kept away from the

assembly ; and the girls would dance with him, because he's so good-looking ; and I'm sure young Gayters, of Leatherton, though he did come over at the Conquest, looks very rough, and like a groom, beside being generally too much in drink to be a safe waltzing partner, and I'm sure we have few enough young men at all presentable, and girls will dance whoever asks them."

Thus incoherently apologized Mrs. Butler.

"I'm sure, sister," said Miss Barbara, impressively, "if you were candidly to say you had been wrong, and the girls had been wrong, it would be in better spirit than flying out at us in that way. But I suppose Dobbleton, who must bear all your mistakes, has not made Mrs. Slime Grump-ton a magistrate yet."

"Why, you see, her husband takes some of King's shooting, and subscribes to our

clothing club, and pays something additional to the curate, and they are both extremely deferential and respectful, and she mentioned casually that her father-in-law's nephew had married a baronet's cousin; so, you see, they are not merely Addingham people; and I'm sure I went at a time I expected she was sure to be out; but I fancy Paragreen must have sent up word to her maid that I was coming, for I told Paragreen to air my green velvet gown overnight for the visit."

"Well," said Miss Amelia, coldly and conclusively, "if you can reconcile these stoopings to your own conscience, and even manage to excuse them afterwards, our interference is useless. We have done our duty by remonstrating with you, so that when our horses are baited, the sooner they can be put to the better."

This was an annual feint on the part of

the old ladies when offended at any unorthodox sentiment in the conversation. They were far too self-indulgent even to intend to undertake the return journey without a hearty meal ; but they had tired even the patience and deference of Mrs. Butler overmuch on this occasion, so that when this terrible threat was uttered she took them at their word, and, ringing the bell, ordered their carriage forthwith as they desired.

This brilliant flank movement for a time completely paralyzed even the more energetic sister Barbara. Miss Amelia could only lean back, and moan feebly at the prospect of six more miles unfed, and probably only cold meat at the end of that. But Miss Barbara was fertile of expedients, and hunger is a quickener of the brain.

She turned to Miss Amelia with great

commiseration, and proceeded to rub her sister's hands and feel her forehead with much avidity.

“ Ah, you may moan, dear ; but there's no one cares here much, if they carried you off in an hour : I knew how it would be, Flavia, with your worritting her with your worldly talk ; she's got her old spasms again, and bad too, as I can see by the patience with which she bears 'em.”

Miss Amelia having now got her cue moaned with portentous emphasis, and desired the carriage to come round at once, if she was to reach home alive.

Miss Barbara here firmly interposed ; “ I know we're not welcome here, Flavia, and you want to get rid of us in any state. But my sister's health is more important than my own feelings, however hurt I may feel just now. I must insist on her not being moved for two hours at least, and you, if

you have common humanity, will not insist on our carriage coming round."

The carriage was unordered, and the attack of spasms had quite abated when the luncheon bell rang: Miss Amelia even owned in the middle of a chicken leg, and after her second glass of sherry that she had been silly to give way so.

But Miss Barbara told her not to agitate herself by talking, and the great thing was to keep oneself up after one of these attacks; and therefore it was her duty to force herself to eat, however ill she felt.



CHAPTER VIII.

LORD DOBBLETON RECEIVES THE COUNTY.

“Here he lives in state and bounty,
Lord of Burleigh, fair and free,
Not a lord in all the county
Is so great a lord as he.”

TENNYSON.

LORD DOBBLETON was entertaining the county at his cumbrous Doric mansion, Aston Hall. Everything was solid, cumbrous, and with an odour of nobility, about the hall and park. Lord Dobbleton himself was a little like his house, solid, cumbrous, rather out of repair; very sleepy withal, and good-natured, but believing intensely in the importance of himself and his



place. His daughters were all married but one, and his son was seldom at home. Lady Dobbleton was the daughter of a great earl in a neighbouring shire, and enjoyed bad health. Their unmarried daughter Agnes was barely pretty, but an unaffected, straightforward girl.

Lord Dobbleton had a great idea of doing the right thing, so at certain periods he subjected himself to much annoyance by entertaining select batches of the county of which he kept the rolls. He was really most happy when tramping about his estate with his agent and head-carpenter or woodman, condemning some weedy ash in a hedge-row or detecting a vulnerable point in his park-palings. He also delighted to sit in his office and decide the squabbles of his tenantry, and see applicants to his farms, and he would gossip away freely enough with these. But he was very stiff and

punctilious with the upper classes, though very free with the lower, if he thought any one the least presuming.

The party has come the night before, and were now dribbling down to breakfast. Lady Dobbleton never appeared till the middle of the day, so Miss Aston had the cares of the tea-urn. On one side of her sat James Butler, and on the other Perceval. Perceval had not been asked by his lordship without some protest from his family, but as his lordship insisted on asking in a humdrum kind of rotation all the neighbouring magistracy whose acreage exceeded a given amount, they were obliged to acquiesce. His two old maiden sisters, who lived at the jointure house just outside the park, had paid a special "indignation" call to their sister-in-law, having heard from Mrs. Major Shanter incidently that Perceval was bidden. But Lord Dobbleton, who

was conscious of being a little henpecked in most household matters, clung all the more from this very consciousness to one of his last marital prerogatives, that of choosing his own guests.

So Perceval was there in great feather, and James was there in very limp feather indeed. With all his present vexations and embarrassments he showed to anything but advantage beside the handsome ready man of the world. And yet James was a cousin of the house and sure of his position, while Perceval was manifestly regarded by several of the guests with mistrust as a *parvenu*.

Besides these we need only name as present at the breakfast-table Mr. Harrup Dunt and his ward and niece, Miss Jessie Amesham, Major and Mrs. Shanter, Sir Wafers Teabury and Scarsley Plumpton, the two county members.

“When does your militia go out, Shanter?” inquired Sir Wafers.

“Upon my honour, Sir Wafers, I believe about the 14th; Mrs. Shanter, my dear, when do we go out? She keeps my engagements, Sir Wafers?” said Shanter.

The Major was of the middle size, and something under it; he had heavy, carrotty, mutton-chop whiskers, and a moustache to match drooping over his mouth. His nose was large, prominent, thick, and Roman. He had a fishy eye. His hair was brushed tight and forward; he had a long back and short, fat legs.

Mrs. Major Shanter was remarkable for her black, beady eyes, and equally stone-black hair, twisted up, after Sir Peter Lely we suppose, into little corkscrew curls. She had a semi-Jewish cast of features, thin lips, and the skin very tight on her face. She piqued herself much on her “vivacity,” and

was famed for her conversational powers. In the morning she affected tartans and pebble-brooches, in the evening hanging draperies and Irish lace.

“Never mind about his stupid militia,” interposed Mrs. Shanter, with great vivacity; “I’m sure I’m worn to death at the end of the month in Whinbury. If Mr. Plumpton hadn’t given us his delightful lecture on Buckle contrasted with Comte, I’m sure I should never have got through. Ah, Mr. Plumpton! you shocked the rector dreadfully, who had never heard of either, and thought they were quiet literary men of the last century, dear, silly old thing!”

“I have somewhat modified my views since then, Mrs. Shanter,” said Plumpton, “and I shall take the liberty of sending you my little lecture amplified and amended. I was very unwilling to print it,” he added,



modestly; "but the committee of the Mechanics' Institute passed a resolution that it must be printed, and the *Herald* had mauled it sadly next day in their report."

"Don't tell me, Dunt," insisted Lord Dobbleton, from the other end. "Bones before draining are pearls before swine. I say, what is your subsoil? You come to me and say beans: I say, keep the green side up. If the land will carry sheep, keep sheep; but who in his senses would try them in those marsh meadows of yours?"

"My lord," said Mr. Harrup Dunt, "you are forgetting, with all due deference, one most material point. A tenant comes to me, and says, 'Mr. Dunt, if you'll find materials, I'll find labour: do I speak fair in that?' 'My good fellow,' say I, 'I really shall find both materials and labour,

for you'll never employ an extra hand in this business, and the labour will be taken from your farm, after all.' "

" Well, I concede the farm-shed," said Dobbleton; " but what were the beans like ?"

" Light in pod and weedy in stalk," concluded Dunt, triumphantly.

" The prospects of agriculture," interposed Sir Wafers, solemnly, " are to me a mist. Whether the towns will absorb the country or the country the towns is to me a problem of no little intricacy. That the increase of population must affect the consumption of crops in some respect, we may, I think, with some limitations, concede. But how the crops will affect the population is beyond the wisest of us to calculate. I can only say, Church and State, these I hold by. Separate them—result, weakness and anarchy : two must be stronger



than one. I say, therefore, these being two are strongest: I don't see how this can be controverted. Besides, it would be going against Scripture to separate them."

"I don't understand your deep political talk, Sir Wafers," said Mrs. Shanter; "but I'm sure it does one good listening all the same. Please tell us how you propose to deal with the masses?"

"Mrs. Shanter," said Sir Wafers, delighted at being deferred to, "you must excuse if I don't make my reply quite as plain to you ladies as I could wish. It requires a peculiar tone of mind to appreciate the answer to a political problem, which, you will forgive me, ladies seldom possess. With regard to the masses, I should take the bull by the horn, and say to them straight out in the straightforward Anglo-Saxon way, 'Masses, you do not

know what you are after. Providence has been pleased to make us, the upper class, better off in material comforts than you. Providence has given us finer feelings, and made us altogether superior beings; therefore, and mark my conclusion, if you are stubborn enough to fly in the face of Providence, and make your superiors uncomfortable by your miseries and agitations, Providence has clearly empowered us to use the full strength of the executive in punishing and putting you down.’”

“Dear me!” said Mrs. Shanter, much impressed; “how beautiful it is to hear you talk, Sir Wafers; it’s like hearing a good man singing hymns. One comes to feel quite good without any trouble at all.”

“Mrs. Shanter,” replied Sir Wafers, with deep feeling, “I have been many years in my county’s service, and whatever humble

eloquence I may or may not possess, has merely come to me as some slight reward of my unwearied application and self-sacrifice."

Plumpton sat chafing in his chair, disgusted that his colleague should have all the talk about the "masses" to himself. And, no doubt, Slopeshire, and the company in general, would have been regaled with his views at large had not a general move from the breakfast-table just then taken place. The company then rose from breakfast, and began conversing in little knots about the lawn.

"Percy," said Mrs. Shanter to the Major, "what's the name of that dreadful man Miss Dunstew is to marry. I want to tell Jessie."

"Don't trouble the Major, Clara," said Miss Amesham to Mrs. Shanter, who was her special toady and friend. The two

ladies had wound their arms inter-mutually round each others waists, and were stepping among the prostrate mallets and croquet balls.

“’Pon my honour,” said the Major, “I don’t know; stay, it’s either Straker or Stott, and he drives a deuced neat dog-cart, and I remember it because Straker of ours always had a mail phaeton, a deuced neat one, and he had it built by Stott, of Short-acre, so it must be either Straker or Stott, and I remember that our Colonel——”

“That will do Percy,” interposed Mrs. Shanter, peremptorily, “the horrid man’s name doesn’t matter, but they say he actually wears earrings, has been in the slave trade on the coast of Guinea, and must wear high collars because he was an Indian chief once, and has a pattern like stamped leather up to his throat.”

“Don’t you remember those odious Miss

Dunstews, how they stood with the Chips at the infirmary ball. It amuses one hearing about these people, though one doesn't associate with them. These petty squireens' daughters are only a shade better than Addingham people after all."

"'Pon my honour, one of those Chip girls is deucedly good looking," said the Major; "I remember when we were in Dublin a girl just like her refusing three of ours in one night, at a ball at the Castle. Bryce came up to Cattle, 'she's refused me, old feller.' 'Gad, I'll ask her myself,' said Cattle. Jove, she refused him. Cattle tells our major, large man, red whiskers, Maloney. 'You're a parcel of muffs,' said he. 'Well, try it yourself,' said Cattle, quite put out, 'for the honour of the old country,' and so he did, but it turned out the girl was married already all along."

The Major laughed very heartily at

this excellent anecdote of his past military life.

“What do you think of young Mr. Butler, Major?” said Miss Amesham, nodding towards James, who stood in a distant part of the lawn.

“Gad, I can’t get a word out of him. I expect he ain’t right in his head: I was telling him the pedigree of my two greyhounds; indeed, I took monstrous pains to make it all as clear as possible, ‘and now,’ said I, ‘which do you think is likely to turn out the best?’ Gad, he begged my pardon, and said he was afraid he hadn’t been attending. I remember one of ours, Cattle’s ensign, name of Shuff, that used to begin the day with milk and brandy, who could never fix his attention to anything, and that was ginning and smoke.”

“Oh, my dear Jessie, Percy knows nothing about it,” exclaimed Mrs. Shanter, “he

doesn't touch a drop ; that's the strange part of it. But he's eccentric, oh, certainly—I had it from the housekeeper—never shoots, or rides, and always at his books—I suppose he's cracked. For no man can get on long without field-sports."

"Gad, I don't know how I should get through the summer if it wasn't for the rabbits," explained the Major, gravely. "Thank God for the invention of breech-loaders, say I, for I've got an evening occupation now at home, refilling my cartridges."

"Ah, Mr. Dunt," said Mrs. Shanter, "How are your pears this year?"

Dunt had just sneaked out across the lawn with evident distrust of the weather, and stood sniffing the gale like the antlered monarch of the Lady of the Lake. He was a strange mixture, this Dunt. A man of petty dilettante clevernesses, always system-

atizing, with keen perceptive faculties, but no breadth of mental grasp. A selfish man and a valetudinarian. Always tightly buttoned up, and always sniffing and fidgeting; with a skin like parchment, and cadaverous lips; a man who fritters away life on useless details.

“My pears,” he rejoined, “are this year a failure, an entire failure. My gardener is so pig-headed, can’t understand when fruit is ripe, brought me one to dessert that ought to have been eaten twenty minutes before. ‘You hound,’ said I, ‘I showed you a pear which would be ripe at half-past eight to-night, and you have brought me the one next it that might have been eaten at six, and is now quite gone. If my cook can bring a soufflet up to the second, why shouldn’t you bring me your pears?’ You see, my dear Mrs. Shanter, that I hate mediocrity in a pear, in a picture, in a

woodcock. These little amenities make life worth having."

"Indeed, Mr. Dunt," said Mrs. Shanter, "you are so well known for a man of universal taste that you needn't explain this to me."

"How do you dress a woodcock, Dunt?" inquired the Major. "Bryce of ours gave Cattle two birds ahead and an hour in Ireland, and beat him easy on Maloney's uncle's estate at Castle Savengeton, in Limerick."

"My dear Major," replied Dunt, "I may seem a heretic, but except for the head I do not care for the woodcock; and no one can dress this so well as yourself for yourself at dinner; get a candle with a good long wick, steep the head in cold butter, and grill it for yourself in the candle-flame on the end of your fork. The ladies will object to the sputtering, but never mind them.

It's more the sensation in eating it of looking at a master-piece of Fra Angelico's than anything I know."

Dunt's cadaverous complexion as he said this looked as if the course of woodcock's heads did not greatly agree with him. The Major promised to try the receipt without fail, and Mrs. Shanter said he should not; and the Major ended by saying that Mrs. Shanter was quite right, and always knew best. And Mrs. Shanter called him a stupid good old thing, and the Major looked highly gratified at the commendation, and Dunt went in shivering to read "the original" which he had unearthed in the library.

Major Shanter then parted from the ladies, saying that he wanted deucedly to go round the Dobbleton stables, and his wife offering no opposition to, nay even encouraging this expedition, he walked off in that direction. There seemed no obvious



reason why this gallant officer should still walk as if he had military spurs on, for he had left the army many years ; or why now, being in easy circumstances, he should be so scrupulously saving of cloth in the legs of his trowsers.

Miss Amesham, still linked with Mrs. Shanter, then gracefully drifted towards another group composed of Agnes Aston, James, and Mr. Perceval.

Mrs. Shanter whispered as they went that Perceval was looking very handsome this morning, and Miss Amesham told her she was a silly and absurd creature, but, nevertheless, did not controvert her statement.

“ Will you show me the flower-garden, Mr. Perceval ? ” said Miss Amesham ; “ I believe there is the largest australian in the county here.”

“ Only too charmed,” said the civil Per-

ceval, and, turning to Miss Agnes, "might I venture to ask you to show Miss Amesham and myself the flower-garden?"

"O, you can't miss the way," said Miss Aston, coldly. "Miss Amesham has been there before too, and seen our *auraucaria* several times."

"Not since it made that wonderful shoot last year," said Miss Amesham hurriedly. "But I suppose Miss Aston has plenty of household matters to attend to just now, so don't press her, Mr. Perceval."

"Certainly," said Miss Aston with the utmost simplicity; "the cook is coming to me with the slate about dinner in ten minutes. You know mamma leaves a good deal to me."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Perceval," said Miss Amesham, "I shall never be a model in the house-keeping line," she added aside to him; "it seems to me so horrid thinking



about what one is going to have for dinner."

Perceval only smiled slightly, and turning to Miss Aston, with a tone that was a little over-officious or even impertinent, said : " We must crave your company then, Miss Aston, for the vacant ten minutes before graver cares. We should be content to sacrifice all hopes of dinner for the company of our hostess, should we not Miss Amesham ? And as for Sir Wafers and Mr. Plumpton, I am sure such abstinence would be highly beneficial."

Miss Amesham looked rather angry at this reference to herself, but she never lost her temper ; neither did Miss Aston seem overpleased at the tone of entreaty which Perceval had thought fit to adopt in addressing her ; but she merely went to her cousin James Butler, and asked him to come and help her to show the garden.

James was coming with them readily enough, much to Perceval's disgust.

"I suppose Mr. Butler is indispensable," said Miss Amesham, "to keep us all steady, and teach us how to behave properly."

"Why shouldn't James Butler come?" answered Miss Aston, slightly evading the question.

"O, by all means!" said Perceval; "Butler is a great reader of books, and one of the worst seats on a horse I ever saw."

"I believe no one has a chance of Heaven, in the present code of gentlemen of the day, who happens to be a bad rider," said Miss Aston to Perceval.

"Well, I never knew a man who was good for anything who couldn't ride," answered he.

"I detest a muff," said Miss Amesham, "more than anything in the world. It is



so delightful to make fun of one ; pretending to be interested in their pursuits, till the great awkward thing takes you into his stupid confidences ; and then, O, it is such fun cutting him dead the next time you meet !”

James, the unconscious object of these remarks, now came up a little after Miss Aston. He saw that Agnes Aston wanted him to come, and that Perceval and Miss Amesham wished him a hundred miles off, and he was too sensitive to carry off well the cares of such a situation.

“Had good sport last season, Butler ?” said Perceval.

“Indeed I only went out twice after the birds, and then only to get a walk with a friend. You know I am a very poor sportsman,” replied James, annoyed at the spirit of the question, but determined not to palliate the truth in his own favour.

"Then I suppose Mr. Butler's share of the bag was not heavy," said Miss Amesham.

"I probably did not touch a feather," said James laughing, and making the worst case out against himself; "but I really forget all about it, except the country we shot over, which was charming; the vale of the Mendips you know."

"Spare us Murray's guide to the English provinces," said Miss Amesham; "I think home travel is the slowest thing I know."

Seeing neither of the others were to be propitiated, James talked only to Miss Aston during the rest of the stroll. Perceval kept cutting in as often as he decently could, but she only answered as much as bare civility required. Miss Amesham talked a good deal to Perceval, who rattled away to her at a great rate, but seemed all

the same to be thinking most of the other young lady, therefore Miss Amesham was a little provoked at times by his random replies. Altogether the inspection of the aurucaria was not a success to any of the parties concerned. When the ladies went in Perceval roughly turned his back on James, and walked off with an unpleasant look on his face.

“So, you conceited young muff, I’ll owe you one for being in my way this morning. I wonder if Agnes Aston cares really about you, or if you were only a pretext for keeping me off. What violent love that other girl would make to me, if I let her. But she’s not my game: pretty enough, but too fond of her own will to please me. Besides, I’m the only man in Slopeshire who doesn’t want her money, and she knows that as well as I do. No, I must marry for connection, and there’s none to be

got by her, that will satisfy me at least. And yet she is deucedly pretty : but I'm sure there's a good deal of devil in her for all her self-contained way she has. And this young prig to come and cross me, with every acre of his insolvent old father's mortgaged, and some of it to me. I'll bear you in mind my young friend, only give me a chance. Now for Scarsley Plumpton. Webb's report wasn't much, but he goes to town, where he may have better luck. Meanwhile, I've nothing better to do but try and help him. Which shall I be first, M.P., or a peer's son-in-law ?”

Plumpton was in the library with Harrup Dunt, as they were talking pretty fast, Perceval took up a novel, and pretended to read in an adjacent arm-chair. Listeners find out more than questioners, thought he.



"I tell you, there's no drama now-a-days," exclaimed Mr. Dunt, in his old dilettante and epicurean way, "I wouldn't go to hear a farce or burlesque if you paid me. We have no play-writers and no play-actors, except when we import one. The fault is in the audience. You can get a good dinner at White's, because the people who dine there appreciate a good dinner, but you can't dine respectably at any one public restaurant in London, because our middle classes are gross feeders and don't know the difference. Therefore a hundred people a day who feed contentedly on garbage at seven shillings a head, pay much better than five, who can distinguish an artistic dinner from carrion, at a pound a head."

"Surely, however," said Plumpton, "the average dinner ought to be encouraged as giving the cheapest enjoyment, to the

greatest number. With regard to the theatre, it is only the Germans who seriously regard it as a vehicle of popular education. The drama seems to me like a tea-garden, leading, in some instances to mischief, generally innocuous, but totally futile as any instrument of progress."

"Wouldn't you send people, then, to hear Shakespeare?" inquired Mr. Dunt.

"Under certain limitations, no," said Plumpton. "Shakespeare improved our language: therefore he is useful to commit to memory in schools, as rhyme seems physiologically more easily assimilated by the immature human cerebral functions than prose: we may in the same way make him a vehicle for the first outlines of English history, corrected, of course, subsequently by Pinnock and Goldsmith, as we shall correct Shakespeare's diction in our higher school standards by Johnson

and the Spectator. Why, Shakespeare wrote like a child; I mean, he wrote like a man with a good voice, who hasn't been taught to sing, but as to acting him, I'd as soon act a pantomime."

"I'll be bound you've never been to one," said Mr. Dunt, a little out of patience.

"There, my dear sir, you leap to a somewhat hasty conclusion. Indeed, many years ago, I went no less than five times to one pantomime. You seem incredulous, but allow me to explain. I had some idea that, as the pantomime has been made a most important advertising medium—for you know the clown leaps through an inscription of Thorley's Food for Cattle, and the columbine pirouettes before Norton's Camomile Pills, thereby directing the attention of even the most frivolous in the house to these commercial products

of this great country—so I thought something might be done by the religious tract brotherhood in illustrating certain received axioms of vital expediency, certain general rules and generalisations for the conduct of life. And as, manifestly, the most frivolous haunt pantomimes, I conceived that those who needed most these axioms would be found among such an audience. I also proposed to introduce during the performance transparencies of Bentham, Adam Smith, and Fourier.”

“Could you favour me,” said Perceval looking up from his novel, “with the name of the pantomime that suggested all these brilliant projects.”

“I don’t see that the name would be at all to the point,” replied Plumpton snappishly; “I was addressing Mr. Dunt, and not aware that you were honouring me with your attention, Mr. Perceval.”



“ I am always glad to sit at the feet of wisdom,” said Perceval, coolly lounging from the room : he went to a small writing table in the drawing-room, and with hardly any hesitation, wrote as follows :

“ You have taken preparatory stock fairly, and we shall get on very well I see. The London address is your only real point, and that Mr. P.’s club would have furnished you with. However, pursue your inquiries in town with as little possible delay, as I have really got a clue now which you must work out. Mr. P. some years since went to the same pantomime five times. You know what that will probably mean as well as I do. I can help you no more. I shall not sign, and expect to have this letter returned the next time we meet.

“ To Luke Webb, Esq., Solicitor, High Street, Whinbury.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE SQUIRE CONSULTS WITH DUNT AND
JAMES CONSULTS WITH MARY.

“But this old dotard farmer from the plough,
Who thrusts his finger in with city scoundrels,
To rob him lacks all flavour, being so easy.”

The Camp of Ceres.

“AND now, Dunt, for business,” said the Squire.

The ladies, consisting merely of the feminine portion of the Butler family, had just quitted the dining room at Leece Court, leaving the Squire to his wine and a *tête-à-tête* with his especial crony, Harrup Dunt, who had come to dine, sleep, and talk various little matters over. So the Squire rang

for a fresh bottle of port for himself and one of claret for Dunt, and the two chairs were drawn close to the fire.

They were an ill-assorted couple certainly, but friendship often is helped by opposition. The Squire, a fresh-coloured tough old man, like a fox, and Dunt a pinched, shrivelled epicurean valetudinarian who spoke through his nose and kept continually sniffing with an imaginary cold. Both were thoroughly selfish men, but their selfishness developed itself very differently in each. Dunt was accomplished in a finikin sort of way, and knew a smattering of several foreign languages and literatures, but the Squire, beyond reading and writing indifferently, and having read the odes of Horace at school, was totally uneducated; it never occurred to him that he was deficient in any knowledge that a gentleman ought to possess. He looked upon art, science, or literature,

much as he looked upon the crochet work of his womankind, as a harmless fiddle-faddle for those who were fit for nothing better.

“Those damnable shares have sunk again since Friday, Dunt, as I suppose you are come over to tell me. You know I mortgaged at four-and-a-half to buy them when the company was formed, as you said I was certain to get eight before the year was out. Why, what a favour you made of letting me have them.”

“Squire,” returned Dunt, “don’t be impatient. The principle of the company is good and the returns must follow; that’s logic. The General Hair-cutting by Machinery, Limited, must be at a premium in a month.”

“I was a dashed fool to have anything to do with such a dashed new-fangled scheme. I hate machinery on a farm and like it no

better on a head, but I thought I might as well take some money if there was any running a begging for an owner."

"My dear sir," pursued Dunt, "let me give you again a brief outline of the scheme. So many million males must—I say must, or they'd run to hermits or Orsons—get their hair cut, say, every two months, many every six weeks. You follow me so far Squire, for I call this our major premiss. From these we must deduct, to be thoroughly on the safe side, a certain percentage for the men who wear wigs and the partially bald; these last need really not be deducted at all, for many of them are as sensitive about getting their few hairs cut as a lad of seventeen is about getting shaved regularly; so after all we only loose the wigged men, and if, as we hereafter intend, we throw out a wig branch and ramify into female fronts, we shall net the whole male popu-

lation, beside the elder portion of the fair sex."

"Ah, you showed me all that on paper," grunted the Squire, "and gallows nice it looked. But I'm gormed if I find my pockets any warmer for all your pictures and tabulated returns. These pretty little ducks and drakes is play to you, Dunt, with Miss Amesham's building leases in Addingham at twopence a yard in your order and disposition; but a few more of these will bring me to a stand-still, with hardly a free acre and not a sound gate-post on the property."

"I tell you the company only halts at present," pursued Dunt, "because we can't hire branch establishments fast enough, and the advertising expenses of any new scheme are always so heavy at first. Mosscrop, our secretary, is getting the thing known right well. He contracted with the head-master

of a large boys' school breaking up to all parts of the kingdom, to plaster one of our prospectuses inside each of their hats with the stiffest adhesive mucilage. (They won't get 'em off without scraping every square inch piecemeal.) We only gave threepence ahead, and the master to bear all risks. Then we always preface our advertisements in the morning papers with something striking, such as 'To the English Nation. The present prime minister is a scoundrel. The above absurd statement would never have been made by any one who had patronized the gilded saloons of the Hair-cutting by Machinery Company, Limited, 28, Oatdale,' turning it off some-way or another afterwards. Bless you, he runs us up a fresh heading every week, according to public events. Mosscrop is worth his weight in bullion."

"Well, Dunt," faltered the Squire, "I'll

hold my shares still, as you bid me. But what about the other matter? If that young dumb cub of a son of mine had a tongue in his head, he might have put a ring on your niece's finger by this time."

"She's an odd girl, Butler," proceeded Dunt, "and I never know what she's at quite myself. She seems to be thinking about that pushing young Jew, Perceval, just now. She didn't mind your boy James when she first came out; he should have closed then. A girl is ready to take any one before she's been about much. The first seems best till she has seen there are plenty better. If she does marry that Jew, as if she gets the bit between her teeth she will in spite of twenty guardians, I don't mind telling you—as you can guess pretty well already—that I shall be in a nice fix. Why, he'll overhaul every penny of my accounts in my management during her mino-

rity; and I've got things so confused, I'm hung if I know how we stand. You can make that all right with James, if he gets her, so I wish to gosh he would, and rid me of all the bother I've had."

"I tell you what, Dunt," whimpered the Squire, who was near the end of his bottle, "if a few more of my farmers smash like Fyvie, and my shares in the Baby Clothes Supply Company get as low as those in the Hair Cutting, Limited, I shall have to make him ask her whether he will or no, and I trust you to back me then."

"We can always apply to Richards, of Whinbury, for fresh loans, you know, even if the worst happens," concluded Dunt, encouragingly.

Where was James all this time while his future prospects were thus being canvassed at the paternal board. He had started that morning to see his clerical friend beyond

Whinbury, and, as usual, had loitered outside the town on the Addingham turnpike. He seemed anxious, too, about the time, for he took out his watch every two minutes, as if he thought it was going to be up to something strange if he did not keep a continual eye on it. By a mere coincidence, of course, Mary Weston appears in the distance, and then James seems to have regained confidence in his time-piece, for he disturbs it no more.

Out of breath is Mary, and slightly after her time, as is the wont of ladies in every transaction of life. But sweethearts are seldom scolded for unpunctuality : men reserve that for their wives.

They walked about a mile or so together, to a quiet roadside inn at a village just out of the main Addingham Road, down a very rough lane. Progress in her march from town to town had skipped over the little

hamlet of Waverton, indeed, progress was so near her chief temples at Addingham, from the altars of which a black cloud hung above that city continually, that she could not be expected to bother herself just here about so pelting a place. The inn had a very quiet little parlour, with an Adam and Eve sampler over the fire-place, worked by the hostess in youth, as thereon stated. It was flanked by a framed funeral card of the hostess's mother, bearing an embossed weeping-willow and pentagonal tombstone. Below ran some studiously vague verses on the mutability of human affairs, which one could not help feeling had been an imposition in their time from the funeral cake shop in deluding the survivors into the belief that these rhymes had been specially composed in memory of the late Martha Pickup.

Susan Ripple, licensed to retail at the

present time and born Pickup, always gave James and Mary a kind motherly welcome. They had been here several times before, and being quiet well-behaved people, Mrs. Ripple had begun to take quite an interest in them. Poor Mrs. Ripple, we must remember, had not the refinements of our upper classes, so she was not scandalized at all at seeing a girl come to take tea alone with her lover in a wayside inn. Perhaps Mrs. Ripple, had this been explained to her, would have obstinately stated, that no chaperon can take care of a girl who cannot take care of herself. But our Lady Floras and Misses de Vere Smythe must make allowances for their benighted inferiors.

“An’ I’ve got a nice batch of currant tea-cakes just baked, an’ I’ll split an’ toast two or three immediate,” said Mrs. Ripple, “an’ you’ll be takin’ some lettuces or green food with your teas, I reckon; there’s no

one in the house-place but old Joe as was from the old bullock smithy, and he's mithering and daft with age, and can wait. What does bullock shoeing mean? Why he's shod many a hundred to drive to Norfolk to their fattenings, and not a man in the parish could do it but he, but the rails have altered all that; and they used to plunge terrible, worser nor a 'orse. But I'll be leaving you, and hold my chatterin', for three is ill company," added Mrs. Ripple with a maternal glance on Mary.

Now every one knows that the secret of currant tea-cakes is to bring them in, hot and hot, in relays at different stages of the tea (we apologize to our fashionable reader, if we get one, for these ungentleel details), so Mrs. Ripple made continual re-appearances, for her discretion could not prevail over her anxiety that the tea-cakes should have full justice done them.



“As I made free to say to old Joe in the kitchen just now, while I was toasting. Seeing them two come in as fresh as daisies minds me of my brother, poor lad, who went for a sowdger to Walcheren, and they lef’ him in a dyke there, so them as came ’ome told me. He was walkin’ the night afore he went with Nance Mather, his sweetheart, when the sun sunk quite bloody. ‘Nance,’ says he, ‘that’s a sign I shan’t get back to you from the wars.’ ‘Nay, lad,’ says she, ‘it’s ownny your red coat for to go a sowdgering in;’ but he was rightest on t’ two.”

“Give old Joe something to drink the Queen’s health in on my account, Mrs. Ripple,” said James. “You needn’t tell him who sends it, or perhaps he’s too ‘mithering’ to ask.”

The hostess continued,

“He wore in the stables once as a boy

wi' th' ould Lord Dobbleton, then he used to sweep up in a Addingham office, but the master went off sudden and give him no character. And for Queen's healths he drinks too many already, tho' he's harmless for all his drunken ways; and a lone woman like me must keep a old man for odd jobs, and putting up the shutters and the like. Were you asking which Lord Dobbleton he were with?" continued the hostess; "not this Lord, but the father to him as belongs now to Aston; that's beyond Whinbury way, a matter of nine mile at after you get past the Three Greyhounds, and a fine park too, and shiny pailings for a mile along the turnpike, and deer as smooth as donkeys."

James felt very uncomfortable at the mention of his uncle's name, and postponed the interview he had meditated with old Joe of bullock-shoeing celebrity.

"Ah, I daresay even you remember many changes about here," he said to the hostess, to divert her mind from the Dobbleton stables.

"I've seen the day," pursued Mrs. Ripple, warming on such a theme, "when gentlefolk would come to Clapperton Common to bate bulls in their own coaches an' four, an' thought no shame on't. Ay, and fowgth their main of cocks in th' barn-pit arterwards. I've seen dandy-hewit turnspits in farm houses, and men stocked for drink at Whinbury Fair. And now you may walk land thorough and never light on one of the like."

"But don't you think a many of these things are well done with, Mrs. Ripple?" asked Mary gently.

"I reckon gentlefolk knew their own mind, and might choose their own sporting. An' our old parson would go too ; so,

happen, it couldn't be so fur wrong; and be agate wi' his laugh and his glass wi' best. A fine set up man like an ash-plant; but now we've a snivelling sort o' chap goes round, wi' a waistcoat into his chin, and coat to's heels, that is continual having his bells rung when it isn't Sunday."

Having thus conclusively established the orthodoxy of the bull-bait and the cockpit, and the last relay of tea-cakes having been duly delivered, Mrs. Ripple made her third and last exit.

"And now I've got you all to myself, Mary, and we'll have a good long talk and sit after tea, and you shall forget all your family troubles, and I'll forget mine, as I always do when I am with you," commenced James.

"O James, they do so tease me about you at home! I'm sure I don't know how I manage to keep up heart against them

betwixt my times of seeing you. Mother has nearly scolded me into promising I would never meet you again—more than once or twice!” faltered Mary.

“But I know I’ve a good little girl,” returned James, “who does not mind them, and who cares for me just ever so little—eh, Mary?”

“It goes against me terrible to abuse mother to any one—even to you, James, who, somehow, I don’t count as any one,” continued Mary.

And James proceeded to mark his appreciation of this rather ambiguous compliment.

“There, that will do,” she pursued, “and her to tell me I only cared about you because I fancied you were rich and a gentleman—I must tell it out, James, because it hurt me so. Oh, it was bitter!”

“There is no occasion to fret yourself

about that, dear !" whispered James, "for if you cared a penny-piece to get a rich sweetheart, you wouldn't let me be sitting here with my arm round you."

"And are you so very, very poor, then?"

"I am so poor," resumed James, "that I do not yet know how poor I may really be. My father is, I suspect, in great difficulties, and really does not seem to know how poor he is, and to him I owe the very coat off my back. I wish I knew the worst, for I am ready enough to work either with head or hand. He seems to put off looking into things, and would resent my telling him to do so, for he belongs, dear, to an old gone world when fathers ruled their sons like slaves, and gave no reasons to any one."

As this was the fullest allusion James had ever made to his domestic affairs, and Mary felt a sort of triumph that she would not lose him now from disparity if he was

really so poor, she was tempted to inquire further :

“ And what is your father, James ? Don’t tell me if you don’t like, dear—it’s only my silly chattering—and you know I trust you without it.”

“ He owns a little land, Mary, and has pledged most of it for money borrowed on it—if you understand—so I have no chance of ever being well off.”

“ You must never go and be well off, or I should lose you,” interposed Mary, warmly. “ You must never be other than just as you are. I should hate to see you in a fine coat like Major Shanter rides to our door in ; and then his wife comes in so grand in such a small bonnet, and pulls all our stock over, and makes father so cross at us afterwards. I hope you will never be a gentleman like the Major, James.”

James did not care to tell Mary that he

knew Shanter, fearing the tongue of his excellent consort, so he merely laughed, and said :

“ There was no fear of a countryman like himself getting brightened up into resembling any military personage.”

“ And now,” hesitated Mary, “ I’ll tell you a very great secret, James, that I’ve kept from you ever so long for fear it should vex you ; and I thought it was quite enough for it to make me unhappy without my troubling you with it, and I must have borne it anyhow.”

James looked very nervous, and only kissed Mary once or twice, and told her to go on, and not to be afraid.

“ Why, you see, mother and father these two years have been set on making me marry William Richards !”

“ Good God, Mary ! why didn’t you tell me all this before ? I see now, you poor

little creature, why they lead you such a life at home!" exclaimed James.

"You are not much vexed with me, are you, dear?" demanded Mary, timidly.

"Vexed with you, dear!—no, but with myself much. What a thoughtless, selfish fool I have been!" said he.

Mary put her little hand on his shoulder, and kissed him, quite quietly.

"Thoughtless!—never with me, James! and I have never had anything but kindness of you yet. But let me go on, dear, though I see it vexes you; it is better to say all out, and adone. Mr. Richards—that's William's father—and mine are kind of partners in some shares, or the like; that's how it came about; and there not being many young folk in our chapel connection to choose from. That's all my tale, and now I'll vex you no more till I go home."

"All your tale, Mary," repeated James,

in great perplexity. "Which way on earth am I to turn? And would you have married this Richards if you had never met that miserable hound myself?"

"Oh James! I can't indeed tell; for since I knew you all has been so different. I can't think what might have been without you; and why should we? Let us talk something pleasanter."

"Exactly; it is as I thought," he muttered; "and you, sweet little unselfish angel, are making the case as light as you can for my inconsiderate rashness." He remained silent and abstracted for some moments, while she tried all her pretty little ways to coax away his unpleasant thoughts.

"Mary," he began at last, after much hesitation and in a very low voice; "give me your hand, little one; there. Now, do you believe I really love you?"

"Oh, James! that I do; why I couldn't mistake of that."

"And that I am not an utterly bad, worthless fellow, but only a very thoughtless and a very unhappy one," said he.

"I believe you are as kind as you are good," she replied, trembling all over and creeping quite close to him.

"Why, how cold your hand has grown. Suppose now, only suppose — what an awkward brute I am," he added, mentally — "that my father had marked me out for some one else and would not hear of my marrying you. It's a mere case you know. What would you do?"

"Wait for you till the end of my life," said Mary, fearlessly. "I can't fear your being true to me, so I could wait cheerful."

Poor James received this answer in the utmost perplexity.

"I must get a reprieve of two or three



days to turn all this over," he thought to himself. "I have clearly no right to spoil an advantageous match for Mary in her own class, when I see no way in my father's lifetime of marrying her myself. And yet can I give her up when I am so utterly infatuated about her?"

Anyhow he could not bring himself to dishearten the poor thing by saying anything decisive now. Why should he indeed? Whatever he determined eventually to do would come to her much better by writing. Maybe this was their last meeting, so why should he spoil the last delicious hour of it? "Come, Mary," said he, aloud, "we'll talk no more of this at present. Perhaps your parents may persuade you into this after all, and if this must come, why it must. But that's no reason, if we are happy now, that we should fret ourselves with it before it comes."

“I shall never give you up, James,” she replied, “for all they can say to me. But with you maybe all is different. Gentlefolk seem to be bound to more that they don’t like than us humble folk, and to fear more what other gentry say and think of them. But if you ever have to leave me I shall always believe, to my dying day, that it is against your will, and no fault of yours; for I have trusted you once, James, and I shall trust you always, and never like any one else after you.”

CHAPTER X.

THE EMBER PIGEON-CLUB.

“These people make every day a feast. With little wit and much self-complacency, each turns round in the narrow circle-dance, like kittens playing with their tails. So long as they have no headache to complain of, and so long as they can get credit from their host, they are merry and free from care.”

HAYWARD'S *Translation of Faust*.

THE Blue Cow, Ember, was the house of call of several convivial spirits who used to pass their evenings there officially as a club once a week, and in their private capacity a good deal oftener. The club was named “The Ember Pigeon-shooting Club,” which sounded sporting, and had



a decidedly aristocratic flavour, but we are bound to say that the finances of the association seldom allowed of this expensive amusement. In fact, as every member paid for his own drink and supper before leaving the house, neither credit nor subscription was required by or of any of its constituents, insomuch that the envious might have doubted whether it was a club at all. Anyhow, the name sounded well, and its seven or eight members included most of the choicest spirits of the little market town. There was, moreover, a decided sporting, or wish to be thought sporting, tendency among most of its members, which went far to justify its name, and there was a tradition of an actual pigeon match having taken place at its foundation, the belief in which mysterious occurrence became a kind of test dogma for candidates on initiation into this society.



Beyond a little ratting, a little coursing, a little ferreting, and an occasional colt-deal, the real bond of the club was the monthly supper.

The house-place of the Blue Cow has cleared its decks for this occasion, and the club has now arrived at the gin-and-water and conversational period which succeeded the more arduous labours of the middle banquet.

Negus, the heavy, rambling-eyed bailiff of the Leece estate, occupied the place of honour as vice-president. The president seldom attended, being a neighbouring horse-dealer a little above the rest in social status. On his right, skilfully diluting the sugar of his beverage with one of those queer little pounding spoons found in public-houses, sat the insolvent and inexpugnable Fyvie. We regret to say these gentlemen seemed to understand each other

perfectly, and we fear the account of what had passed between them, as given in King Butler's office, verged on the poetical. On Negus's left sat John Calf, special body-footman to Scarsley Plumpton, Esq., M.P., and beyond him William Richards, of Whinbury, a regular member, but not very frequent attendant, owing to his living at ten miles' distance. He had been originally introduced by his next neighbour, a little, iron-grey-haired old man, much worse dressed than the rest of the party, commonly called "Old Joe," or, by full description, Joseph Cragg, of Waverton. He was more a drudge and hanger-on of the club than a member, though admitted to the banquets from the high esteem in which his sporting experience was held. He had been many things during his life, and seldom stuck to any, except poaching, into which, when out of place, he always had



relapsed. He was past that now, except a little hare-snaring, but he supplied the club with ferrets, rats, and did odd errands for them. He was a sort of sporting mentor to William Richards, an overdressed, sullen-looking young man of the town-gent shopman type. A few lesser notabilities of Ember completed the party.

"Gentlemen," said Negus, raising his glass without rising, "we drink fust, according to custom, 'The Ember Pigeon Club,' and then we dewote ourselves to general conversatium. I'm happy an' proud to set here as your wice, and shall say no more in the way of orreterry beyond wishing every individgel here present a happy and a sporting evening. Is your beveridge to your taste, Mr. Richards?" he added, slipping from the orator to the conversationalist, and alluding to the gin-and-water, and not the bishop.

"I don't know as I ever got a more comfortable mixture," replied Richards. "Old Joe and I were on rare spree beyond Whinbury yesterday. We fought my bull-bitch Sall on Clapperton Common against Tim Spoule's lurcher Ellen for a dinner a side, and Joe and I won easy, and we'd some fine food, and Moselle afterwards, at the Red Lion, and when I got to my guv'-ner's office this morning blow me if I could see a blessed old figure in the account-books, they all went round so. I call that life," he added, triumphantly; "don't you, Mr. Calf?"

"You named Moselle, Mr. Richards," replied Calf, "and Plumpton has got an old bin I'd be glad you'd try if you'd come to our place the next time Plumpton has a party, as there might be some ridic'lous prejudice against my uncorking any unless Plumpton was entertaining too. They tell

me," he added, knowingly, "it's the only wine for out-and-outers now, and that all the bittiful gurls in town will drink nothing else."

"Ah," said old Joe, "you young uns talk of seeing life : you can't do it, I say, why I see old Squire Tandem when he wore young, and Captain Snape, ducking six fine ladies in ball dresses in Clapperton horse-pond at three in the morning : and then they come on to my forge, and drank off raw brandy in tumblers. Those were men, those were."

"You know a thing or two, Joe," said Richard, with great respect, to the wretched old driveller, who was three-parts drunk, and, turning to Mr. Calf, he continued, "I never see such an eye for a 'orse, a ferret, or a bull-pup, as my worthy friend's Mr. Cragg."

John Calf swore a fearful oath, and said

he was sure of it afore, might he make so bold as to order Mr. Cragg another bottom of gin at his own proper and peculiar charge.

“And now,” said Mr. Calf, “as Mr. Joseph seems to apprequiate my humble tribut, I’ll give the present company the ’ealth of a young lady in Whinbury, which a little bird has told John Calf, esquire, the present informint of this distinguished company, is uncommon sweet on our accomplished friend and sportsmin, Mr. Richards, which I am not the man to call the blush to his cheek by namin’; but the gals allus likes best them as is sporting and sees most life, as it’s only right and natural, as I’ve allus found it myself, if I were not too modest afore the present cumpany to confess so.”

Due honour having been done to Mr. Calf’s toast, Mr. Richards said he would

not, in the presence of such cherished friends, mistrust them enough to deny the soft impeachment. He supposed it was the fate of every young man of spirit to be appreciated as he deserved in some female heart, and he begged leave to thank them in the name of the prettiest girl in Whinbury.

Conversation then becoming general, Fyvie asked Negus, "if the old boy at the Park was in any better of tempers about his ejection?"

"Never you mind, Fyvie," said Negus, "he can't git you out so long as I kip yer friend. I told un I cooden find you to serve that last notice but one, and next time as to how you kep' the door agin all comers with a double barrel gun, and threatened to shoot all hands; Lord, he'll niver git you out, unless I turn agen you, an I'm your fast friend, 'ealth Mr. Fyvie,

an long 'ears to yer on yer farm, apaying as little rent to old Screwing's as you think fit."

"That's my sort, Mr. Negus," said Fyvie, "and I wish every landlord had a hupright merciful bailiff like you, sir. It's relieving the fatherless and the widder, that's what I call it: it's being out and out christian. Doesn't the insolwent want more than the fatherless and widder? In course, for they've ownny got nuthin', but the insolwent's got nuthin' and ow's a deal more besides: and I don't mind tellin' you I've got a nice yearling I mean to enter in my brother's name for the Farmer's Plate next year, and I give you a tip to back un, Mr. Negus."

"I must compliment Mr. Joseph Cragg," said Negus, again becoming oratorical, "in my official kerpecity from the cheer, which may give the weight of horfice to my

'umble syllerbles, for the rough and tough gaminess of that last batch of ferrets with which he supplied me." (Applause from the company in general.) "I need only insure the present company that one of them animals getting her mouth-strings undone sucked no less than four live rabbits in one burror, which they was all dug out arterwards by a farm-boy, name o' Gutteridge, with a hare-lip, up by the lane to the right of Pidduck pasture, which is a credit to any ferret, let alone to any christian. It seems to me, tho' I may be wergering round from the question afore the meetin', a beautiful perwision of natur to have perwided the ferret to catch the rabbit with; natur has alser perwided for our amusement by making badgers difficult to dre, and cocks uncommonly quarrelsome. These is my sentiments, and if any gen'l'm'n has anythin' to say again 'em,

I'll be glad to give him and his appiniums my best attention."

Mr. Negus seeming however to express the general sense of the meeting, no one took up the gauntlet of controversy among the Ember pigeon-clubbists, and the evening terminated in a most harmonious manner.

Mr. Calf rose hurriedly to leave, saying that Plumpton double-barred his front door every night in person, for fear the burglars should get in and find how little victual there was in the house.

Fyvie and Negus lurched arm-in-arm along the high road to Leece, some two miles distance.

"I'll cast you back in my gig as far as Whinbury, Joe," said Richards, with a rather thick utterance. "I'll put my mare along to-night," he added, with semi-drunken ferocity.

"What's up now?" demanded Joe Cragg. "Is it Nance Adams waiting for you at Whinbury?"

"Confound her, yes," confessed Richards. "You know I've given her up long ago; but then I get things out of her about the other gal."

"That's your game, is it?" laughed Joe. "Take care of her, she's a proper vixen. You'd better not make her jealous."

"O never fear, I've got a pretty strong hold over her, if she should turn restive." And this engaging young gentleman drew the gig-apron comfortably over his knees, and the worthy couple started on their ten miles' drive.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SQUIRE EXERTS HIS PARENTAL
AUTHORITY.

“You will not, boy! You dare to answer thus!
But in my time a father’s word was law,
And so it shall be now for me. Look to’t;
Consider, William: take a month to think,
And let me have an answer to my wish.”

TENNYSON’S *Dora*.

THE morning after James had left Mary on coming down to breakfast at Leece Court, something more than usual was plainly wrong with the Squire, he was so preternaturally quiet. When a chronically cross man will not rise as usual at the petty domestic casualties of over-done eggs and under-done toast, something serious is plainly

in the wind. To-day the urn had leaked spasmodically and flooded the muffin plate : Miss Carry had been later than usual, and had gracefully whisked off the cream jug with her sleeve in settling her flounces, but still the Squire, beyond a low inward growl gave no sign of vitality. The "boy," as special Job's messenger in the family, had come in to say that one of the best Leicestershires had been found drowned in getting in after some watercresses at a stream side, and had been too long in the water for mutton even for the servants' hall. Yet still the Squire moved not, and, beyond cursing the boy playfully under his breath, seemed like a justice of the peace done in marble, or rather preserved at Madame Tussaud's as a specimen of the breed.

"Why on earth, James," began Mrs. Butler querulously, "are you so fond of visiting that clergyman friend of yours

beyond Whinbury? What can you find to talk about together?"

"Well, mother," replied James evasively, "Norris is a right good fellow. Push the toast over, Mab?"

"When a man talks about a right good fellow" interposed Miss Mabel disdainfully, "that means some one as gruff and surly as a bear, who is quite superior and above making small-talk to mere girls."

"You shall come and see Norris some day if you like, Mab; but he was only a sizer at my college, so you ain't likely to take a fancy to him."

"I suppose," said Mabel, "you mean he was educated for charity. This is the way you associate with your horrible middle-class people."

"Norris has twice as good a head on his shoulders as I have, and did well in honours the time I failed."



"Why, of course," suggested Mabel triumphantly, "it was bread to him that he shouldn't be beaten, but with your position you couldn't be expected to go drudging away like a charity-school boy: but I wonder the manners of these people don't disgust you. They haven't our refinements, you know; why, their mere voices are enough to make me shiver: nothing shows vulgarity so much as a man's voice, but then middle-class men are gentlemanlike in comparison to the girls."

James was getting rather uncomfortable under this turn of the dialogue, but he would not retreat without making some stand, "Well, the girls are pretty enough sometimes, you must allow that much, Mab."

"No, they are not really pretty," resumed that young lady with much warmth, "because their teeth are never good and

their feet are always coarse. And as to forwardness—why it stands to reason that they must have heard and seen a great deal that no girl brought up among the refinements of higher life is ever in the way of. So they are as artful and cunning as they can be, every one of them.

“What do you think, mother?” demanded James in hope of a diversion.

“That Mabel has expressed herself with great spirit and very properly,” slowly enunciated Mrs. Butler, “I have read in novels of low matches which gentlemen have made, but then always these minxes are supposed to get educated afterwards ; how is never explained. Why, you are simply disgusted when a lady marries her groom ; why make a romance of a peer marrying a cottager’s daughter, like that Lord of Somebody in Tennyson?”

“Because the superiority ought to be on

the man's side. In your groom and lady case this is inverted," rejoined James.

"Well there was some good at least in that creature in the poem, for it says specially that thinking about how unworthy she was of the honour his lordship had done her, killed her off in a very few years. And that's a good deal for a poet to admit, for I believe that, except Byron, they are all middle class people themselves."

"And then, too," added Miss Carry, "that other absurd story about the king and the girl begging; but that's mediæval, and isn't intended to be believed more than dragons and satyrs. What dreadful language she must have used at the banquet next day, and how tipsy she must have got with a sudden unlimited supply of liquor. We should give her a fortnight under the Mendicity Act now—at least I'm sure papa would if he caught her trespassing."

“Carry,” said Mrs. Butler, solemnly, “on one point I must set you right: dragons and satyrs are both mentioned in the Bible, so they are to be believed in. I knew no good would come of your reading Colenso and Darwin.”

“Well, mamma,” replied Carry, “it doesn’t matter, as they’re both extinct now, I suppose.”

“But it does matter a great deal, my dear,” insisted Mrs. Butler.

Here the Squire broke, for the first time, into a vigorous shower of curses at their female chatter. This ebullition almost relieved his family as much as the widow of the dead knight’s tears did the superannuated nurse in the Tennysonian ballad, as it showed the Squire was becoming himself again.

“James, I want to speak to you in my study,” he said sullenly, and proceeded forthwith to that mis-named sanctuary.



“Whatever you do, agree to all he wants, James,” hurried out Mrs. Butler, tearfully. “Dunt wrote to him this morning, and I suppose some of his shares are gone down to nothing.”

“Now James,” said the Squire, as graciously as he could, when his son entered, “I’ve been a good father to you, and brought you up well, and never give you too much money, to keep you steady, for nothing makes a young man fling out so as having a certain income, and now I want you to go and get married. You know well enough who I mean, so don’t stand fingering that chair, or you’ll make me bust out a-swearing again, which the doctor says is bad for my liver, and provokes bile—it’s Dunt’s niece I mean, an’ a prettier girl there ain’t in these three shires, and a tidy bit of brass to her elbow, you dog, the day she ‘loves, honours, and obeys,’”

concluded the Squire, with facetious biblical ferocity.

"She probably won't have me, father," James faltered. "Anyhow, I should like to think this over for a month or so before I asked her."

The Squire brought down his fist upon the table, making his inkstand, pens, and sand-glass rattle audibly.

"But you've give me this confounded same answer this twelvemonth, and my affairs won't wait a month."

"But what can my marriage have to do with your affairs, father?" pursued James, driven now almost desperate.

"Because you can keep your poor old father and mother and sisters out of gaol by it!" returned the Squire, rapidly degenerating from the ferocious to the tearful. "I'm an old man, and won't trouble you long, but I can't tide it over

six months more. Dunt has written this mornin' that I must pay up a call of five hundred, and Richards is callin' in that mortgage on the property. The notice came yesterday, and Dunt's this morning."

"Well," said James, aghast, "you can get the mortgage transferred, at any rate by paying a little higher interest."

"Ah, but I've a double mortgage on the same ground already!" said the Squire, with a feeble return of cheerfulness at this proof of what he considered cuteness; "and it won't do to let this get about."

Here was a pretty pass. James was scrupulously honourable in all his dealings, submitting to any degree of imposition rather than incur the least reproach of sharp practice; and here the old half-shrewd, half-muddle-headed Squire had committed an act clearly more criminal than the embezzlement of some few pounds

by a poor devil of a clerk, which the *County Herald* of that morning was full of.

“Good God, father ! but you ought to shut up this house, and turn all the servants off immediately. Of course you will do so at once, and perhaps things may come round in a few years.”

“I haven’t so many years to live,” said the Squire, “that I can afford to die in a seaside lodging-house. I couldn’t bear it, lad. Why, what would Teabury, and Muffler, and Plumpton say. There’d be an end of all my influence at once, and I’ve always held my head with the best of them, and married the Lord Lieutenant’s sister. No ; I’ll stick to the old place as long as I’ve an ounce of life in my old bones, and when I’m gone, if you don’t choose to save it now by marrying a girl that is waiting for you—well, it won’t matter. I reckon it won’t vex me then—and you never were a Butler heart

and soul. We came in with King Richard, and they'll go out with me!"

Thus the Squire, believing he was a very disinterested and magnanimous man, and had spoken noble sentiments, and that James was an ungrateful young cub. The plain English of this selfish speech being that sooner than shear one feather of his dignity in the county, he would cheerfully leave his son a beggar.

"Hear me out, father," cried James, "I will do anything in reason to save the family and the place. I will go and stay with Dunt, and see whether I can bring myself to care about this girl, or whether, which is more important, there is any chance of her accepting me."

"Now you're getting back to your senses," said the Squire, resuming his normal surliness, when he thought he had bullied his son into acquiescence. "I'll write

to Dunt by to-night's post, and he shall ask you there for a week, next Monday. He'll do anything to oblige me, and indeed he ought in this case. This is what I call getting on and doing business. I wonder why the deuce we couldn't understand each other before? this might as well have been done a year ago : ay, and would have saved money too."

"I am a free man then till Monday, father," said James, coldly.

"You're a bachelor till Monday, you muff, and how soon after you ring your bells and buy your favours, damn me if I care."

And James left the study looking several years older than he had entered it. There was a small plantation at the back of the house on a knoll, which he had been fond of as a boy. He had bird-nested here, and when older had watched many sunsets



thence, and thought of all the great things he was to do when he grew up ; how he was to be cleverer than any one else, and achieve matters high and wonderful. His college disaster had cured him of all this, but still he had an affection for the place, and hither he went from the interview with his father to fight out his future course with himself.

He flung himself down among the wood orchises and the damp rich smell of the flowering grasses, and thought :

“ How far can this theory of obedience to a parent, which all the ages have confirmed as a parent’s right, be pushed. I wish to do right in this case, Heaven knows, if I only knew in this conflict of duties which to choose. My father has committed an act clearly criminal in the eyes of all honourable men : his moral sense seems derided, and he does not seem to see its full

heinousness. Now, how far does this act of his absolve me from obedience to him.

“ Again, by an act of mine, this marriage—assume it feasible—I can save my whole family from poverty and exposure. But, *contrà*, I am pledged to Mary: I am honestly fond of Mary, and do not care for Miss Amesham.

“ Next, suppose myself a free agent, and that I could marry Mary to-morrow: can I trust my affection sufficiently to encounter all the trials and little disgusts which, I will not palliate the fact to myself, an unequal match always entails? I was miserable at home, and I made love to Mary for amusement, now the matter is serious, and she is a good girl, with an advantageous marriage offered her in her own class, so I am bound to pursue some decided course with regard to her, and at once. Besides, I ought to

think of *her*: will she be happier with me in the long run, or with this Richards? If I marry her, I must take her away from all her surroundings, and trust to her being young enough to mould herself to me. Then all my family and relations cast me off, of course, and I must earn my bread—but that comes sooner or later, in any case, from my father's incurable embarrassments. Anyhow, of this I am clear, that the first question is: ought I, with regard to her ultimate happiness and my own, to give Mary up or not? This I must debate quite independent of my father's complications and this proposed marriage, if I can. Clearly my duty to Mary is paramount to my duty to my father. And it is equally my duty to speak plainly and openly one way or the other now to her. If I loiter on in the old indefinite way, I may spoil this match with Richards, and get so dan-

gerous a power over her, that harm may come of it. Yes, we may both mean well, and yet harm may ultimately come for all that."

CHAPTER XII.

JAMES WRITES TO MARY.

“ We are wise, the world is old,
 Antic changes shift and hold,
Boys will swear, and maids will weep,
 Weep and smile again.

“ Songs are for an April breast,
 Feathers for a gleaming crest;
They may wake that need no sleep,
 Sing that feel no pain.”

Poor James had remained in sore debate with himself about Mary for several days ; meanwhile the visit to Dunt was approaching nearer and nearer. Backed by his father's solicitations, and the blank looks of his mother and sisters, every day the con-

viction grew stronger in his mind that he ought to give up Mary. He tried the question backwards and forwards, in one light and another, and yet he could see no solution otherwise to his difficulty. James was a diffident man, and he doubted whether Mary would be happier with him when compelled to earn his own bread in the long run, than with a husband of her own class. Add to this, he almost feared that this tremendous change in all his surroundings and ways of life might change himself for the worse, and make a life with him no easy fate for a young girl. Of this one thing only he was convinced, that if he saw any chance of having to give Mary up eventually, it was both more honest and more really kind to speak out now. At length, after a most severe struggle, he composed this letter, comforting himself with the faint hope, that though he felt

convinced it was honest, it left still some little option with Mary of remaining true to him if she choose :—

“MY DEAREST MARY,

You know I love you very much, and though this is possibly the last letter I may ever write to you, you may always reckon on my continuing to love you though we may never meet again.

I shall try and say what it is my duty to tell you now as honestly, dearest, and yet as kindly as I can. You told me when we last met that you had the offer of an advantageous marriage in your own class, and that you were made unhappy at home chiefly because you refused this. Now, believe me, that it is both my duty to tell you to accept this marriage and my wish that you should do so. You will be probably happier in the long run with an equal



than with me, even if I could marry you now, and this is, I fear, utterly impossible in my father's lifetime. Therefore, as anything may happen to me in the meanwhile, it would be very wrong for you to lose your youth by waiting for the chance of me—and—I write this with the deepest pain—I shall not come and see you again. It would not be right for me to see you again, now my chance of ever being able to marry you is so distant; and I have been a wicked, rash, thoughtless fool ever to have trifled with you so far. I do not excuse myself in the least for what has past. Thank God, no real harm is yet done, and in a year or two you will forget all about me as the happy mother of children, and then you can show your husband this letter, and he will tell you, what you do not perhaps see now, but think me fantastic and cruel, that I was never more



really kind to you than when I seemed most cruel! good-bye! good-bye!"

This was written and duly directed, but for some days James could not bring himself to send it. He went to the post-office once or twice, and returned with it in his pocket. And last he got it into the box and was then nearly going in to ask for it out again if Mrs. Slime Grumpton had not just then driven up for a money-order, which light trifle was sufficient to confirm James, and the letter went. But all that night and the next morning he kept tormenting himself with picturing the effect it would have on Mary when she received it. He imagined her now angry, now in tears, and ultimately worked himself up to such a state, that after nightfall the next evening he took train into Whinbury, and paced for an hour or two outside Weston's

closed shop, looking up at the windows and listening. Of course he found out or heard nothing relative to the effect his letter had produced, but just before going home, thoroughly beaten, he nearly ran against an over-dressed surly-looking young man, who eyed him rather curiously, but ultimately went his way down a side street.

James reached home towards midnight, utterly worn out. He had bribed the guard of the last luggage train to let him go in his van. The engine stopped on the Mid-Slopeshire Loop-line to water at a small country station about a mile and a half north from Leece Gates, and across the fields there was even a shorter cut. He saw a light still burning in the old Squire's room as he went in, so that he argued neither he nor his father had very pleasant thoughts as companions that night. He slept, however, soundly enough from fatigue

bodily and mental, and woke to find an answer from Mary lying beside his bed, where the boy had placed it when he brought in his clothes. He hurried these on, not having the courage to open the letter at once. He had a kind of superstitious feeling that it ought to be read up in the little wood where he had come to his determination. At last the seal was broken, and these were its contents.

“You are cruel and unkind, and I see now how deceived I have been to think you ever cared the least about me. I hate you now, and will never see you again—no, not if you were to beg me a thousand times. If you had ever loved me honestly, you would not give me up now for any cause. If you still loved me, you would not dare to write me fine words and reasons to justify your falseness. I will never, never see you again. You gentlemen are

all alike; you think only of yourselves. We poor girls may amuse you for a little, and then good-bye. Whether I marry or not some day is now no business of yours. You have done your best to make my life unhappy. It will be no use your writing or attempting to see me again."

That was all, and thus, thought James, all my dream of love and roses ends. He felt a terrible sense of loneliness now it was all over, yet he could not help telling himself it was much better she should take his letter angrily, and misunderstand him, than give way to acquiescent sorrow. He had feared she would have written tearfully, entreatingly, asking him to see her only once again, and have thus made their final separation trebly difficult. It was bitter enough for him to have to sit still under such misapprehension, but it was clearly his duty to do so, if he could lessen thus to

her one tithe of the pain of their parting, and it was manifestly best, he thought now, for both that such a separation should take place; and yet during the day, when he went moping about the house, trying to read, to do business, to get to his old occupations, each and all with the utmost futility—when certain recollections of what was ended came over him, little incidents and trivialities of his expeditions with Mary,—he felt a loathing to face the life that lay before him, an impossibility of ever getting back to his every-day pursuits. He took up the favourite passages of his favourite authors, but these were all gall and wormwood to him.

So a week went by, and yet another week, and still he put off his visit to Dunt. The Squire bothered and pressed him every day to go; but, even to the Squire's not very delicate eye, James was plainly so

ill and harassed that even his father doubted if any success would accrue to his scheme if James started in this frame of mind.

But though James did not visit Dunt, Dunt came over several times during these weeks, and was closeted with the Squire for several hours whenever he came. It must have been urgent business to bring Dunt over on one of these days, when the rain was coming down by pailfuls, for he was as tender of his skin against wet as a cat is of her fur. He had, however, clothed himself as if for a Crimean winter; but the footman outside was much troubled by this freak of his master's, who, he confided to Mrs. Paragreen, "was usually very reasonable about keeping in in wet, however fidgety he was about having vittals to the minute, cuss him." What is more to the

point, Dunt, on departing, gave James a general invitation to visit him when he pleased; and the Squire flattered himself his project was in tolerable train, as James was beginning to get back to his books, and to abjure the lounging-about do-nothing life into which he degenerated when out of sorts.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO LEADING MEN IN WHINBURY AND THEIR DEALINGS.

“These are two broad-brimmed knaves that preach at
chapel,
And cheat folks all the week. They will appraise you
A piece of tape, a piece of land, a horse,
A loan, a lass, old boots, a keg of brandy.”

The Rival Merchants.

WHEN Mary received what she considered James's cruel and faithless letter, she was at first stunned, and then had cried a very great deal. She had noticed, she thought, an alteration in his manner during their last meeting, but she never expected this, since she had trusted him wholly and

entirely. Acting, as a girl generally does, from impulse, she could not conceive how James could act against his own inclination from reason, therefore, she concluded, he must no longer care about her; and when she sobbed herself out over the thought of this, there came over her a reaction of anger, during which her answer was written. Sarah Webb was naturally her chief consolation during this trying season; and as Sarah had expected some such termination to her sister's romance all along, while comforting Mary she naturally confirmed her in her impression of the faithlessness of gentlemen in general, and of James in particular. Sarah Webb, moreover, at this crisis, advised Mary to show Mr. Butler she did not care for him one bit, by receiving forthwith the addresses of William Richards; and Mary, after vehemently asserting she was sure

she did not care for James the least really now, thereupon burst into tears for a quarter of an hour. The hardest trial of all for Mary was, that she had to keep as quiet a face over her sorrows as she could at home; but Mrs. Weston soon guessed how the case stood, and she was shrewd enough not to drive Mary to desperation by any reproaches for the present; but she saw that now or never was the time for pushing the interests of her protégé, young William Richards.

About a week after Mary had answered James's letter, Amos Weston took down his neatly-brushed broad-brimmed hat from its peg, and his bulky umbrella from its stand, for it is a sign of election and respectability to have a broad umbrella, and, stepping from behind his counter, confided the interests of his business during his

temporary absence to Mr. Toby Blick, his apprentice.

“Now, Blick, I’m stepping round for an hour to Mr. Richards’ office, and if any one wants me special you’re to say I’m there. If Mrs. Shanter comes, or any other pull - about - buy - nothing customer, you’re to say I’m at a religious meeting for destitute drunkards’ orphans. Do you hear, sir? If Mrs. Shanter comes, you may be as stupid as you please, and don’t gossip with her on any account; get her out the shop as soon as you can with civility, for it won’t do to lose her carriage.”

“I’m fly, master,” said Blick with a broad grin; “a collection for the destitute drunkards’ orphans. I’m sure to remember.”

But Weston was already some way down the High Street, and Blick was left in

command, so he began to kill flies on the counter with his measuring rule, and the air of an emperor.

"Are yer alone, mate?" whispered a voice from the shop door.

"As a pelican in the wilderness," retorted Mr. Blick scripturally, for he was taken very often to chapel, and some bits of the reading would stick. "O my, ain't you got a pair of stripey bags on to-day, Richards!" exclaimed Toby Blick, as that young gentleman shambled in with a diffidence somewhat out of character with his gorgeous costume. "Our guv'ner's stepped round to yourn, Gash Company, Limited, I reckon," concluded Toby, epigrammatically.

"I'm sweated for time, Toby," pursued his friend; "old Joe's waiting for me with three prime rats and a black-eyed 'bull' in the Quarry Meadows, and he says they

loses mettle when caged long, so yer see there's reason to be in a hurry; but I thought I jist run round and ask about that young party."

"Uncommon slow and a deal of waterworks in that quarter lately, mate. Glass nailed 'much rain,' and the old lady uncommon vicious and scriptural. No use you're calling now," reported Blick.

"I didn't go for to think of calling," said Richards, with a kind of sullen diffidence. "When a man has rats a waiting for him on his mind, he ain't in good trim for the little delicacies of female fascinating."

"You see a man may be fit for one and not the other," assented Blick.

"I run agen that ere confounded chap of hers, about eleven Toosday night, afore the door here. I were uncommon near punching his head for him, but I didn't; out of

kindness for her," observed Richards with an angry thump at a heap of flannel.

"I expect it ain't all right in that quarter, leastway Nancy Adams let out as much to me, as came here to see the other sister and, perhaps, me too, a little," admitted Toby, modestly. "So if you'll bide awhile, an' the other chap has sheered off, you'll have a better chance nor never now, my boy."

Richards received this intelligence with great glee and gratitude, but becoming impressed that no man of proper feeling should keep such fine rats waiting, he hurried off to rejoin Joe and the "bull."

He returned, however, for a moment to thrust his head in at the shop door and call to Mr. Toby Blick.

"So that's in the wind now with Nancy Adams; she's taken up with you, my friend, Mr. Toby, has she?"

"What have you to say agen it, if she has?" returned the apprentice, sullenly; for it is in human nature to resent interference on such delicate points, even from our closest friends.

"I say a deal for it, for it eases me, and I wish you joy of a vixen, my boy;" retorted Richards junior, laughing. "She's bothered me off the face of the earth into courting her, and now she plagues me like a wild cat because I've sheered off. You're too good a chap to get into her hands."

"I can take care of myself," concluded Mr. Blick, in a dogged tone.

Richards junior had hardly vanished when the Shanter chariot made all the windows of the High Street rattle, and paused ultimately at the shop door. The Major handed his wife out with great care and model assiduity.

"Now dear," said she, "you can loiter

about the town, for I've an hour's shopping, and a man is in the way. There'll be some new handbills, I dessay, about the streets for you to read, or you can go to the saddler's and pull his harness about; but mind you are *not* to go to the Three Greyhounds, even if you do meet a friend who will take no denial, and you are not to smoke till you get home, or I shall put you on the box as we go back."

The Major departed humbly on his assigned round, eyeing the Greyhounds remorsefully, but continuing his route with the reflection, "she'd know by the smell if I was to take spirits in that dashed close carriage."

"Ah, Blick!" said Mrs. Shanter, comfortably seating herself: "Weston's out, I suppose; be good enough to fetch him. I know he would be put out not to serve me himself. And I'll turn over your new

stock of pocket handkerchiefs while you're gone, so as not to lose time."

"If you please, mum, he's very sorry, but he had to attend a religious psalm-meeting for the dissolute drunken orphans, with three ministers in the cheer," said Blick, with great promptness, and adding, as he conceived, several variations of additional force to the message.

"You've given the message wrong, you stupid boy; but I suppose I must do with you this time," simpered Mrs. Shanter. "Now for some stockings, and anything new in the way of collars you may happen to have. There's a good boy. Is your master's pretty daughter married yet, by-the-bye? I forget her name," inquired the lady, rapidly getting into personal talk, as was her habit with all she addressed.

Toby remembered his master's warning

about gossip, so knowing Mrs. Shanter required some sort of an answer, determined to say nothing about Mary's present lover.

"No, she ain't married yet, Mrs. Shanter, but there's a young chap name Richards, father most respectable land agent and accountant, as would give his eyes to get her."

"Oh then, of course they will be married," said Mrs. Shanter interested, and leaping to her conclusion, "he will be a capital match for her, I have heard of old Mr. Richards."

"Don't know I'm sure, mum, it ain't the business of a poor prentice to know his master's affairs," said Toby with feigned stolidity.

"Well, she's a pretty girl and looked a little above her position always. So, I wish her joy. And now, as I find none of these

exactly suits me, except these cotton-reels, which I'll take home, on *approval*, mind, we'll go on to the flannels."

We must return to Weston, whom we left on his way to the office of Mr. Richards, senior, land-agent, accountant, and, we may add, negotiator of loans: a man of power in Whinbury, and, with Weston, the originator of most of the local schemes in that town. He was a huge heavy man with small eyes and a long heavy nose: a massive, clumsy, large-limbed man, with pasty, flabby cheeks. He had a heavy eye, and slow, ponderous manner. He was a plodding man, whom you never could hurry. He had no sense of humour and the grotesque, and would thence drift into flowery metaphors and scriptural allusions when such were singularly out of place and out of taste. He had an idea that such sentimentalities disarmed his less wary customers;—and, possibly, in

a few cases he was right. He dressed always in black, and spoke with great deliberation. He was as shrewd as his son was feather-headed. Weston and he had had many dealings together. Weston was the quickest of the two, but he had not Richards' capital. Richards was the most long-headed; Weston had more power of combination. Add to which the bond of their chapel connection, and we shall see how the two men had worked together very well.

As Amos Weston walked down the High Street of Whinbury on his way to Richards' office, he represented well the typical middle-class dissenting tradesman. He oozed all over, as it were, with conscious respectability, from the very creases of his cloth and the very folds of his neck-tie. The manner he had of "moving" to acquaintances was respectability itself—and he met



many. Yet there was something about the man's thin lips and large tight-drawn mouth that would make one wish to be at the mercy of many a man in this enlightened kingdom sooner than of Amos Weston.

"Well, Weston," said Richards, as the other entered and took a chair in his office, after carefully closing the door, "any more shares taken in the Whinbury Gas Company?"

"Only ten from Major Shanter as part payment of a bill I've done for him."

"Well, that ain't much," said Weston, with a sneer; "but we'll stick his name pretty freely about our prospectuses. Army rank may sound well."

"Ah, that's the worst of the business!" replied Richards; "his wife ain't to know. We must put his shares to an 'influential well-wisher,' or some other alias. She's a sharp one, she is, and keeps all the money.

That's what sent the Major to me first. The poor man had hardly enough for cigars and brandy-and-water. He's taken ten five-pound shares, and thirty cash, for a hundred at three months."

"That ain't so very bad, as the shares didn't cost us a penny. It was a beautiful scheme; a sweet classical scheme; always remember I sketched it out first, Richards," said Weston.

"Yes, I believe you did," returned Richards, drily; "but you couldn't have moved a foot without my five hundred to start the thing."

"Well, you've all that back now, and we've a precious lot of shares now in our sole proprietorship. If we could only get rid of 'em faster," continued Weston.

"I begin to be a little nervous about Dunt's mortgage," said Richards; "there's very little chance of there being any in-



quiry, unless his ward married some one who was to quarrel with Dunt, which is possible, or to have a head for business, which is unlikely among these Slopeshire squires, whom I suppose she will choose from."

"Well, you've got him as chairman of the Gas Limited, as well as that mortgage being on wonderful interest for any kind of real security," insisted Weston.

"Still it's the biggest job I ever handled in that way, and Dunt is such a queer scatter-brained chap about accounts," observed Richards. "I've been worried, too, about my son lately, which has put me out. I wish he'd be twice as wild, if he'd only be wild quietly. It don't look well seeing an Elder's son going about the town in broad daylight with a old drunken reprobate and a cage of rats. The Rev. Josiah Baruch was here yesterday turning

up his eyes about him, but I reminded that party that his pew-rents had slackened rather lately, and that the Elders were going to meet next week, which brought him to wonderful. I wish William was married to your daughter; I think she'd sober him soon, if she takes after her respected mother."

"Ah, she's great force of character, has Leah, and a saving wife too. I say nothing agen her," resumed Weston, "but to my mind she's bore the girl a little too hard, or we should have married her before now. She's been keeping company with some chap from London, which has set her agen William—and he being a little backward too. But the London chap has vexed her lately somehow, so now's our time."

"Well, I must bring William in about supper-time in a night or two. I must do the boy justice that he's willing enough,

if he were not so shame-faced. Comes of his bad company," said Richards.

"So say I, my friend, and the sooner I see you both the better pleased I shall be. Trust me to manage the girl."

CHAPTER XIV.

No. 16, PORTLOCK STREET.

"What know we of the secret of a man ?

His nerves were wrong. What ails us, who are sound,
That we should mimic this raw fool the world."

TENNYSON'S *Walking to the Mail*.

ARMED with Mr. John Calf's reference to 16, Portlock Street, and the note from Perceval about the pantomime, Webb took the night mail to town from Whinbury on his trip of private inquiry. Portlock Street was a dingy little street, half a mews, into which it degenerated before it ended ; still it was very near an aristocratic square, and this, when tailed on to the direction of a

letter to Portlock Street, gave Portlock Street quite a lordy flavour.

“No. 11, No. 12,” soliloquized Webb, “damned dusty hole for a rising statesman—lodgings to the tune of fifteen shillings a week, and find your own candle. Well, I never did see so many cats; the very leads and areas is alive with ’em. Here we are, No. 16. Why, No. 16, how long is it since you’ve had your rusty old face washed? You haven’t killed many housemaids with your winder-cleaning. Bell refuses to act. Well, here goes for the gentleman’s face out of spirits on the knocker. Ah, there they come, sure enough! Good-evening, missus.”

A faded, old, sharp-featured charwoman had answered the knocker. She wore a moth-eaten front, and what had once been a black lace cap, but what it now had become, except a jumble of threads and

greasy ribbon ends, this chronicle is unable to depose.

“ You’ll be the new Water-rates, I reckon ; you’re a pleasanter-looking one than the last, though I knowed him twenty years, and won’t speak agin him now he’s gone to his last home, in Barking Cimiterry. Well, you’ll git into our ways soon. I’m Tapscott, and Mrs. Flim never pays anything except after three o’clock. She ain’t respectable, she ain’t; not she. Do you think she’d do as her neighbours? Not she. She’s a mind above that.”

“ Oh, she ain’t respectable,” answered Webb, without stirring a muscle of his face ; “ then we shall git on uncommon together. I suppose that’s why I was recommended here. Why ain’t you a bill in the window? I suppose your paper company ain’t declared a dividend, or you’re afraid of the duty.”

“Lor’ bless yer,” said Tapscott, “we never git no lodgers, ’cept one or two old customers.” Mrs. Flim has a humour for keeping her card of ‘lodgings to let’ under her pillow at nights. What a mind that woman has!”

Mrs. Tapscott ended with something between a grunt and a whistle, which evidently meant she defied the universe to produce Mrs. Flim’s equal.

“Then I’ll just step up, and have a chat with the old lady,” replied Webb, cheerfully, and determined not to be taken aback. “I ain’t the Water-rate; I’m a new lodger from Norfolk, in the hair and bristle trade; Tubs and Smalboy, them’s my guv’ners.”

“What ever are you a doing? You see Mrs. Flim now. Well, that is a good one. Do you think she sets at home to be wisited like women as ain’t geniuses? No; her

one rule is, she never sees her lodgers 'cept in a thunderstorm, and a butcher only at the full moon. She put herself out for society? Not a bit of it. She too many resourses of her own." Here Tapscott let off the remainder of her vocal steam with a hissing sound, and then calmly added: "I lets the lodgings."

"Well, my dear Mrs. Tapscott, you'll do quite as well, although my admiration for Mrs. Flim is rising every moment from your description of her," answered Webb.

"Come in then, and look 'em over; we've three sets of rooms; best floor is Stubb's Coppice; ground flour, in here, Plumpton's Forest; and the attics, Bailey's Pastures. We call 'em after our oldest lodgers, She gave the names, she did. I hadn't the head for it."

"I think the ground floor 'll suit me best," replied Webb, dubiously, "as I have

an ill-convenient kind of string goes wrong in the calf of my left leg as pervents me getting up-stairs when I've been out to dinner overnight, Mrs. Tapscott."

"You musn't say Mrs. Tapscott to me if you're going to stay; say 'Tapscott.' She says t'other is too formiliar, and won't have it," said that lady, shaking her head sternly.

"You must tell me as a friend what your other name is—your Christian name, I mean," pursued Webb, with a tender solicitude.

"We don't do nothing in the Christian line here," said she, with great triumph; "she won't have it, and she's uncommon original. Well I suppose I had one once, but I've been charing that many years I've forgotten it now. I was a fondling, I was, and I was allus called Tyburn at the 'sylum, but she changed it to Tapscott. I

was a gel then. Stay, there was something about a Charlotte, but I expect that must ha' belonged to a friend of mine."

"Have you been here all your life?"

"Yes, with her and her sister."

"And the sister," continued Webb, "was she as—talented too?"

"Yes, she was, young man," Tapscott replied, in a dry matter-of-fact voice.

"I suppose Mrs. Flim is taking an airing at present?" he added, by way of small talk.

"She go out? Then your supposings is wrong. Why, they're plenty of feather-brained hussies to do that," exclaimed Tapscott, with great contempt, "and much good they learn in their outings. No, it's such an me as is fit for going out; she wooden demean herself."

"Then for goodness' sake show me into Plumpton's Forest if it's habitable," said

Webb, losing patience, and feeling his brain reel; "and if I ain't too unoriginal in asking for something to eat, for pity's sake let me have it at once."

"If you're going to break out like that, you've no call to take the rooms at all," interposed Tapscott, with much spirit.

Webb composed himself at once, and was duly inducted into Plumpton Forest, an ordinary fourth-rate lodging-house sitting-room, with a fifth-rate bedroom appended. It was one comfort that Mrs. Flim's originality stopped short of her guest-chambers.

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